

APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

-WORLD CONQUEST STARTS WITH THE CIVILIZATION OF RUIN-

Author: Fehu Kazuno

illust: Jun

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Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra: World Conquest Starts with the Civilization of Ruin, Volume 5
Fehu Kazuno

Translation by Charis Messier
Illustration by Jun
Title Design by A.M. Perrone
Editing by A.M. Perrone
Proofreading by Yvonne Yeung

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Prologue

EVERYTHING seemed to be going well for Mynoghra when they obtained the town of Dragontan from their negotiations with Phon'kaven. The two nations formed a formal military alliance, and everyone believed their relationship would lead to accelerated expansion and technological development for both. However, things quickly went south on the day of the Dragontan Cession Completion Ceremony.

Takuto, Mynoghra's Commander and the King of Ruin, had come under attack from enemies hailing from an unexpected place. He'd let his guard down, thinking his current defenses would be enough to stave off an attack. During this moment of weakness brought about by overconfidence, Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials, Veiled Saint Fenne, and Slurping Witch Erakino struck.

Mynoghra never imagined a Player with game mechanics on their side would join forces with the Saints of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia, a foolish oversight leading to their civilization sustaining a fatal blow during this surprise attack. They had lost their mightiest Hero, Sludge Witch Atou, to Brainwashing and their Commander to death at her hands.

The Game Master's cheat-like ability to forcibly change every action's outcome to one he favored had plummeted Mynoghra into a devastating situation that rendered all their resistance futile.

Mynoghra could do nothing without its Commander. As an empire built upon his powers as a Commander hailing from *Eternal Nations*, Mynoghra shared Takuto's fate in every sense.

In that moment, it seemed like all hope had vanished.

But Takuto Ira wasn't dead.

That same night, he showed up in front of the devastated Dark Elf Sage, Elder Moltar, and acted as if nothing had happened.

His body might have been unscathed, but he'd never forget the pernicious events of that day. Takuto never forgave anyone who made an enemy of him. He was a young man who had consigned countless challenging enemies to the cold embrace of oblivion with his ingenious strategies. The name Takuto Ira had been engraved in many a foe's heart with awe and dread.

And now that very man had begun his march toward vengeance.

Shrouded in a cloak of boundless rage and bottomless malevolence, the King of Ruin took his first direct action since coming to this world by seeking to take back what was his—Atou.

Chapter 1: Settling Accounts

THE Divine Nation of Lenea was the new holy kingdom founded by the two Saints who had forcibly seceded the Southern Province away from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. The tranquility the region was known for had been recently replaced with the sort of tumultuous energy any religious state would frown upon. The change could be written off as the sort of reform that comes with founding a new nation. But the region was a shocking sight to behold for anyone who knew what Qualia's Southern Province was like before the change.

One such man, who'd once called this place home, stared wide-eyed at the drastic change that welcomed him after being away for so long. He was clad in the pristine white armor of a Paladin, with a beautiful Holy Sword strapped to his waist.

"Why, hello there, stranger! You've been gone so long, I thought I saw a ghost!"

The man turned around at the sound of a convivial voice speaking to him.

The region might belong to a different nation now, but Paladins were still revered as authoritative figures by the people. This particular Paladin was indifferent to the stuffy decorum his position required and liked to treat everyone as equals, so he had a wide network of friends. People who didn't care for him politically didn't hesitate to call him a charlatan, but he had immense support from certain demographics. It wasn't unusual for someone to speak to him out of the blue, and he often knew the people who did.

"Hm? Oh, long time no see, Mabel," he greeted with a casual wave.

The middle-aged woman owned the apothecary the man used personally and someone he'd known since he was a boy. She gave him a hardy slap on the back, like she was welcoming back a friend of her son who'd just returned home after being away for years. He was slightly exasperated by how she welcomed him with violence, but not entirely put off by it. The pair of them continued to chat away happily despite being in the middle of the busy road.

"You haven't shown your face 'round these parts in ages, boy. What've you been up to?" she asked. "You haven't been slacking off on the job again, have ya?"

"Don't go there! I ain't a kid no more, so stop treatin' me like one. Speaking of which, what's happened to this place? There's not even a trace of

those lazy stiff stuffin' the place up. If I didn't know better, I'd say I'm in a different country," he said, promptly voicing his suspicions.

His demeanor and word choice were a far cry from the humility required of his position, but the woman wasn't bothered by it. If anything, she looked like she was dying for him to ask and pounced with an amused response.

"Do ya really not know? Of course it's like a different country, because *it is!*"

"Huh. Care to explain? You see, my last mission had me somewhere isolated. I'd really appreciate it if you could update me if you have the time."

"Sure thing! I'll tell you everything you need to know. So, to start..." she launched into a long explanation.

The man ended up burning more time than expected listening to the woman as she digressed here and there in her storytelling, but he felt it a worthy trade for obtaining the information he wanted. Then again, he might've been in so much shock that he didn't have the wherewithal to mind such trivial prattling right now.

"...Hmm," he hummed after hearing her out. "To think that all happened while I was away. Seriously shocked the socks right offa me. Sounds like everything's gone to hell and back."

"You can say that again! I've no idea what you were up to, but you're such a naughty boy for bein' away during the biggest chaos of the century," she nagged. "Do yer job, Paladin!"

"C'mon, gimme credit. Don't go 'round spreading misinformation that I wasn't workin' when I was. I was out risking life and limb to annihilate evil, y'know? Me not knowing about all this stuff is all a part of God's holy plan," the man casually responded as he gestured wildly with his hands.

People slowly started to gather around him and Mabel. They were the townspeople who'd admired and respected him since long ago.

I'm not gettin' outta here any time soon, he thought as he nonchalantly responded to the various people who came up to greet him in turns.

"I'm just yankin' your chain. I'm glad I got to see ya after all this time. You've always been such a holy terror. I've been worried thinkin' you might've gone and died trying to save some poor sap. But it looks like God hasn't forsaken you or us," Mabel said, voicing the sentiment shared by everyone there. Relief and joy over reuniting with the man showed through her wide, toothy smile.

Yes, those were her emotions toward the man whose whereabouts had been unknown for far too long...



“Welcome back, our pride and joy, High Paladin Verdel!”

Verdel responded to the townspeople’s warm welcome with a broad smile and a bashful, “I’m back.”



WHEN High Paladin Verdel arrived at the former Southern Province Paladin Headquarters, the sun had already reached its zenith and people were beginning to break for lunch. As far as Verdel knew, the headquarters located a stone’s throw away from the cathedral was a utilitarian structure containing a training arena, single living quarters, a few jail cells for holding criminals, and an interrogation room.

Now it bustled with Paladins and people who looked like private businessmen going to and fro. The dining hall was cram-packed with so many towers of haphazardly stacked paperwork, it looked more like the office of a large trading company.

Verdel spotted a clergyman he knew by name mumbling to himself, looking like the living dead, as he sorted through one stack of documents. Before he could approach the man, a squire barreled into the room, practically tripping over his feet, shouting, “Another drunken brawl has broken out in the streets!”

An Under Paladin, curled up on the floor for a catnap, shot to his feet and sped out of the building like a wild dog was nipping at his heels. Verdel grimaced, sympathizing with what felt like the urgency and tension of a squadron the night before heading into battle. He headed toward his favorite seat, trying his best not to get in anyone’s way.

Sitting in his choice spot was a Paladin notable for his close-cropped hair and hulking frame. Verdel cracked a wry smile when he saw the man looking just as fatigued as the rest. He clapped him on the shoulder despite the Paladin ceaselessly racing his pen across a bunch of wrinkled papers.

“Whoa, did they turn this room into the morgue? Because you look like a dead man doing paperwork, Paladin Thomas,” Verdel said, cracking a joke.

“Put a sock in it. I haven’t slept for days here—” The Mesial Paladin called Thomas lifted his head, revealing an unhealthy complexion and dark bags under his swollen eyes. As soon as he saw Verdel, his expression lit up with surprise and joy, and he bellowed, “Verdel! I can’t believe my man Verdel is back! You’re such a jerk for not contacting me! C’mere, big guy!”

All of the exhaustion seemed to have been blown right out of him, because Thomas jumped out of his chair fast enough to flip it over. He pulled Verdel into

a big bear hug, celebrating his friend's return. His reaction was more than enough to see just what kind of relationship the two shared. In fact, Thomas and Verdel had overcome various dangerous missions together and considered each other brothers in arms.

Verdel responded to his comrade just as he always did. Fed up with Thomas's clingy embrace, he slipped free and put space between them.

"Quit yellin' in my ear already. And get offa me!" he demanded. "I see you still haven't fixed your clinginess problem yet. Anyway, can I have a minute of your time?"

Their loud voices drew attention. The other haggard Paladins in the room shot them curious looks. They looked surprised to see him, but their reactions were tame compared to Thomas's because they all belonged to different factions from Verdel.

The long history of peace in the Holy Kingdom of Qualia gave rise to factions of varying sizes that kept each other in check. Unfortunately, all the baggage connected to this history had been carried over to Saint Soalina's newly formed Divine Nation of Lenea. Although they no longer openly confronted each other, the various factions still kept their distance.

With politics and past prejudices constantly at play in the background, few people tried to get close to a troublemaker like Verdel, and even fewer understood the just heart beneath his rough exterior. In that sense, Paladin Thomas was one of the precious few who understood him, and was a true friend and brother in every way that counted. And that was exactly why there were things Verdel could only discuss with him.

"Minutes are hard to come by these days, but it's almost time for me to take a break," Thomas said. "...What, is it something you need to talk about in private?"

"Yeah, you could say that," Verdel nodded. "I mean, don't you see all those scaaary people glaring daggers at me to shut up? I'd rather talk somewhere we won't be interrupting others or be interrupted ourselves."

Thomas furrowed his brow at that remark. Qualia might've had its factions, but the Order of Paladins was united under their unyielding faith in Arlos. They might clash with each other over political positions and personal interests, but they were fundamentally working toward the same goal. Whatever their circumstances might be, they would always join forces to defeat evil. In Thomas's eyes, that was the way of the Order of the Paladins and how a follower of the Holy God Arlos should act.

Still, Verdel's demeanor suggested there was more to this conversation he wanted to have.

Knowing him, he must've gotten himself into another sticky situation. The question is, what did he do this time? Thomas eyed his friend dubiously.

"C'mon, friend. Don't give me the stink eye. It's not as big of a deal as you might think," Verdel said with a shrug. "Oh, and don't say a word to Commander Fjord. I'd rather not hear his loooong lecture until after I've slept off some of the exhaustion from my mission."

"You seriously haven't reported in to Captain Fjord yet?" Thomas shook his head with a look of utter disbelief. "For crying out loud, it's a miracle someone like you ever made it to High Paladin."

"What can I say, my actions speak for themselves. I'll meet you outside," Verdel said nonchalantly, waving his hand as he strode out of the room.

Thomas sighed heavily as he watched him go. And then he told one of the Paladins, who was watching them from afar, that he would be taking a late lunch out of the office.



VERDEL led Thomas to a house located in another part of town. With its small size and rough-hewn construction, the house appeared to be designed for the less wealthy. If that wasn't bad enough, it seemed like it was left vacant for several years, and while the support beams were intact, the whole place reeked of mold and was covered in a thick layer of dust.

Thomas was exasperated by his old friend's uncanny skill in finding these sorts of places that ran contrary to where a Paladin would normally frequent. Whether Verdel was aware of his friend's opinion of him or not, he didn't seem to care as his attention was entirely elsewhere.

"The Divine Nation of Lenea, eh? Our Lady Saint has taken quite the drastic measure, hasn't she?" Verdel remarked, sounding less than impressed.

"That she has." Thomas nodded. "But this region has changed for the better. A great many people have regained their ability to laugh and smile again. And injustices have been set right."

Thomas had spent their entire private conversation telling Verdel all about what had been happening in the Southern Province during his absence. The initial founding of the Divine Nation of Lenea was done in absolute secrecy. A great deal of information was kept secret even from the Order of Paladins, but they at least knew significantly more than the people on the streets.

Thomas had filled Verdel in on every last detail he knew since the High Paladin had been left in the dark during his long-term away mission. And

Verdel's response to it was just those two deadpan sentences. While Verdel seemed surprised by the information, he didn't experience the same joy or emotional response the rest of the Paladins had.

"Righting injustices, eh? I was wonderin' why I didn't see those fault-finding stiffs around anymore. Makes sense if they were all offed like lambs before the slaughter," Verdel said dryly.

"Don't put it so crudely," Thomas chided. "This is where you say they received God's just punishment. In fact, some of the priests closest to us have escaped judgment... Well, a few were on the receiving end of God's wrath."

"And that's why things have improved 'round these parts, eh? Not like anyone can go against a Saint with killing the King of Ruin under her belt. She's achieved the stuff of legends, that Saint. Central can't lay their hands on her without thinkin' twice." Verdel hopped up and sat on top of the dusty table, not minding the dust cloud that puffed up beneath him.

Thomas scowled at his lack of decorum, but he knew Verdel well enough that he wouldn't change his bad behavior even if it was pointed out to him, so he settled with flaying the High Paladin with a judgmental glare. Verdel shrugged, as if to say, "Ooooh, you scary," earning him a long-winded sigh. Thomas decided to get them back on topic by voicing his concerns.

"The problematic clergymen have been rightfully punished and are now a part of our main faction. Many of the things we used to have to overlook to our shame can now be loudly condemned. Justice will be done."

Fanaticism burned deep within Thomas's eyes.

Verdel's eyes narrowed upon spotting that distinct change in his old friend, but he just as quickly returned to his flippant self, swinging his legs off the side of the table to keep from being caught.

"With that said, Verdel, a word of warning," Thomas said, his tone darkening. "I understand your heart of justice well, but I doubt many in this country will. Doubly so since the Saint of Blooming Burials doesn't know you. I'd hate for you to be condemned to a Divine Punishment by mistake. Can't you do something about that attitude of yours and behave yourself now?"

"You've got a point there. But what's a guy to do? I was born with this personality..." Verdel shrugged.

"What kind of attitude is that to have, Verdel?" Thomas shook his head at him. "Be serious for once in your life. This is me worrying about you here."

"Yeah, the last couple minutes of this conversation have taken an awfully dark turn. Are all these Divine Punishments decided and meted out by the Saint herself? It seems a bit like overkill to me."

Calling it a Divine Punishment was just a pretty way of referring to

government-sanctioned executions.

Even Verdel counted as a man of the cloth. He'd caused his share of problems during his tenure but never crossed the line. In fact, the worst punishment he'd ever received was being told to cool his head off at home for a bit. He typically just had to deal with being chewed out by his superiors and the priests. If someone like him was now a candidate for execution, this country's internal state was far worse than it first appeared.

"No..." Thomas paused for a long moment. "It's not the Saints making the decisions. Commander Fjord and Lady Erakino are acting on their behalf. Those two are likely the ones making the hard decisions."

"Wait, who's this Erakino person?" Verdel asked, arching an eyebrow. "I don't remember that name..."

"Lady Erakino is...how do I put it? The Saint of Blooming Burials's..." Thomas hesitated, "...friend? I think. That's what we were told."

"Heeeh... Her *friend*, eh? If memory serves me well, it's unprecedented for any Saint to have friends," Verdel said, not hiding the skepticism in his voice.

"I'm in no position to comment on that," Thomas said. "At any rate, people are flocking to serve under Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne. Our standing with the Holy Kingdom and the Alliance of Elementals is still up in the air, but I'm certain they will come to understand our stance."

Verdel began organizing the information in his head now that he had a grasp of the big picture. He didn't know much about the Saint of Blooming Burials or the Veiled Saint personally, but he knew that the Saints all had to offer something to God in exchange for using his Miracle Artes. And that they were mentally unstable as a result. Some residual attachment to what they had sacrificed was likely the driving force behind them founding this new nation.

"If you asked her, the Scribe Saint would surely joi—"

"Don't even bring it up," Verdel cut him off. "I can never see her again. *Never.*"

"I see... I'm sorry, friend."

Verdel clucked his tongue as the memory of the girl he hadn't seen for far too long haunted his thoughts.

Because it was all over for him, anyway.

"You know, we can change this country for the better now, Verdel. Do you remember what we used to chat at length about when we snuck out of the barracks and into the taverns as squires?" Thomas asked, his voice laced with nostalgia.

"Yeah, those were the days. We sure were young and dumb."

"I haven't forgotten the oath we swore that day. For the sake of the people,

for the sake of creating a world free of sadness, I will fulfill God's holy mission as his Paladin."

Memories of the past came flooding back to Verdel like a revolving lantern. Memories of the days he believed in God, the good of people, himself, and how he'd recklessly charged ahead.

It was all over for him now.

"What about you, Verdel?" Thomas asked. "Is your oath still as good as it was back then? Has the sword you dedicated to the people kept its brilliance? Or has it begun to dull?"

"Of course it's still goin' strong. Don't ask stupid things. My sword's brilliance and my faith in God are burning as bright as ever. Though I can't blame you for second-guessing from the way I act."

Yes, High Paladin Verdel had possessed unwavering faith. He had stuck to his oath.

But that was all in the *past* now.

"By the way, you said you have something you wanted to talk about? Sorry for chatting about other stuff the whole time. What's up? I'm happy to beg Commander Fjord for forgiveness with you, whatever it may be," Thomas offered.

They had been talking about heavy stuff for so long, Thomas began rolling his stiff shoulders as he walked toward the lone window in the dank room. He opened the creaky wooden frame that had stiffened with neglect and looked outside. He was calculating the time based on the sun's position. He had his back turned to Verdel.

"Ah, yeah, that's right," Verdel said casually. "It's quite simple, really."

"Why did you call me all the way out here for something like that then, Verde—"

Verdel plunged his Holy Sword right through Thomas's back.

"GUAAAAGH! Wh-What...are..."

Thomas stared aghast at the Holy Sword sticking through his abdomen. Even as he was about to lose consciousness from the crippling pain, his training as a Paladin kicked in, and he instinctively rolled forward and pulled out the sword, desperately putting distance between them before he looked back. Standing in the very spot of his aggressor was undeniably his old friend—the man he had gone through thick and thin with. There was no mistaking it—High Paladin Verdel had attacked him.

"Why..." Thomas choked out in a strangled voice.

"Because it's all over for me already."

Verdel's last words to his friend didn't contain an ounce of emotion and

were finished off with a swift downward swing of the blood-soaked Holy Sword. The stone-cold eyes watching Thomas until his consciousness faded into the eternal grip of darkness didn't waver once.



THE offices of the former Southern Province Paladin Headquarters were jam-packed with the poor saps swamped with a never-ending workload. One of the High Paladins, who'd been racking his brains to figure out where he could reappropriate funds from to support their insufficient budget, suddenly noticed a familiar face standing in the doorway and called out to him.

"Oh, you're back? You didn't come back together?"

He thought the Mesial Paladin would return with the person he'd left with, but that wasn't the case. He was curious about what they had been furtively whispering about, but he didn't want to get dragged into any trouble for sticking his nose in another faction's business, so he decided not to ask any prying questions. The other man didn't seem to have much to say on the matter as he returned the High Paladin's greeting with a silent nod. He would've said something if they had a problem on their hands.

"Well, not that it matters if you're alone. We've got a mountain of work to tackle. I'm sure seeing your old friend did you a world of good. Keep up the good work, would ya?"

If the Mesial Paladin's friend didn't bring them any trouble, then they had but one job—to sort through the paperwork built up into literal towers around the office. Sadly, their work was the type that, if you let it be for even a moment, it found ways of doubling and tripling in that time. The sooner they finished, the less they would have building up on them.

Which reminded the High Paladin of the work that had newly come in while his colleague was out for lunch. He grabbed a folder off his desk and looked over at the other man.

"Oh, that reminds me, some additional claims came in while you were out. Mind taking a look for me?" He handed the paperwork to his colleague, feeling guilty that was his reward for coming to see him. His guilt multiplied when his colleague accepted the extra work without a word of complaint, although it's not like complaining would change reality. Instead, the High Paladin expressed his gratitude to the man heading back to his own desk, "Thanks, Paladin Thomas."



Paladin

Combat Unit

Strength: 3~7 Move: 1

<<Holy>>

<<Holy Sword Artes>>

<<Faith>>



Description

~The forces of good's warriors of light.~

Paladins are a unit unique to the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and the Divine Nation of Lenea. Strong against evil forces, they receive special buffs that make them capable of even competing with stronger units. On the downside, they lack any other remarkable buffs, which makes them less useful against good or neutral-aligned forces.



THE city where the forces of good lived out their daily lives had an infuriatingly complex layout that often seemed at odds with its name: Divine City Amrita. The city wasn't purposely designed to make its inhabitants want to rip out their hair—it had gradually grown more complex as various sections were expanded, repaired, and redesigned over the centuries.

Once the largest city in Qualia's Southern Province, Amrita suffered from the same flaws even after it'd been made into the Divine Nation of Lenea's capital. Whether you were attempting to go to the main streets, the residential districts, or the old shopping district, a single wrong turn down an alleyway would send you in the opposite direction of your destination. Even the locals born and raised there often stumbled across paths they never knew existed.

At the end of one such winding alley, Fjord, a High Paladin and commander of Lenea's Order of Paladins, was guided by a local to a dark and eerie block surrounded by two-story houses that eclipsed the sun.

"Thank you for waiting, Cleric Cayman."

"Good to see you, Captain Fjord. Thank you for coming," answered the oldest clergyman there, lifting his gaze from something on the ground to greet Fjord. He heavily rose to his feet and bowed to the Order's commanding officer.

Cayman was the Cleric charged with the care of this district's parish. Cleric was the position given to Qualia's Priests who engaged in healing and medical work, and they continued in their positions even after the Southern Province came under Lenea's jurisdiction.

Boasting a deep knowledge of the diseases and injuries that afflict people, Clerics used to give various instructions to believers according to the guidelines handed down by Central. Now they were engaged in various medical activities in Lenea per the Saints' orders. Clerics held an especially esteemed rank among the clergy as their profession required specialized knowledge. Their duties ranged from basic medical care to midwifery to inspecting foodstuff circulating in the marketplace for spoilage and toxins. There wasn't much precedent for it now after many years of peace, but Clerics even took their expertise to the battlefields during times of war.

They had one other vital role to play as well.

"Is this the one?" Fjord asked, his voice grim.

"Yes, they are the poor soul who has returned to God's loving embrace. Please join me in praying for them to rest in eternal peace..."

Cleric Cayman directed his somber gaze down to where a corpse that was so badly burnt, the flesh and bones had carbonized almost beyond retaining any semblance of a shape. Inspecting corpses that had died from unnatural causes also fell under a Cleric's many duties.

"It would be my honor. A moment of silence, please," Fjord said, signaling all the clergymen and Paladins in attendance to close their eyes in silent prayer. It was the duty of Arlos's believers to pay respect to the dead and lead their souls back to their rightful place.

The clergymen solemnly prayed and recited scripture to help the deceased return to God's side without getting lost. Before long, the simple funeral led by Fjord came to a close and everyone opened their eyes.

Fjord inspected the crispified corpse, the gleam of one who seeks justice burning in his eyes as he spoke to Cleric Cayman. "I must say...this is far worse than I had anticipated. What in the infernal blazes happened here?"

"What you are looking at are bone fractures caused by blunt force damage to the whole body and lacerations caused by a blade," Cleric Cayman reported clerically. "This was followed by the whole body being consumed by intense flames while the victim was still alive. From what I have seen, I highly doubt this was the work of a Human."

More like the work of a monster, Fjord intuited, but he didn't dare utter his conclusion aloud for fear of inciting unnecessary unrest. For if he had said it, he'd be letting the others know that there was an evil being capable of inflicting such savage injuries lurking within the shadows of their great city. He was suddenly compelled to scan their surroundings. One good look around informed him that there was no trace of anything being burned aside from the body itself.

"Was this not the...murder site?" he asked.

"I have never heard of any arte that allows one to carbonize only a body to this extent. As someone who has vanquished much evil and has even vaster knowledge of the various wicked beings in this world, how do you perceive this scene, Commander Fjord?" Cleric Cayman asked.

"I'm sorry, I've never come across such a thing in person or writing either..." Fjord shook his head.

He could think of plenty of Fire Mages capable of casting spells that could burn a person alive, and he knew of more than one fire-breathing monster. But both would've damaged the surroundings along with the victim. Did the perpetrator kill the victim elsewhere and purposely dispose of the body here? Or was it the work of flame magic beyond Human understanding? Such powerful and mystifying magic was outside Fjord's realm of expertise.

The bizarreness didn't end there either.

Fjord couldn't escape the icy chill skating down his spine at the aberrations he saw in the corpse. It was hard not to be distracted by the charred flesh, but Fjord also didn't miss the damage to the bones caused by unimaginable blunt force.

Where do I even begin? he wondered. Even the man with a lengthy history of dealing with the supernatural and unexplainable, needed time to ponder this particular case.

"C-Commander! Commander Fjord!" one of the young Paladins accompanying Fjord cried out hysterically, breaking the silence.

"What is it? I understand this is a shocking sight, but you are in the presence of the deceased," Fjord chided. "Be more respectful and lower your voice."

"H-He's...um, well, he is...!"

Fjord looked back at his young subordinate, whose face was ash white with fright. He decided not to censure the greenhorn too much for making a scene, because he still lacked experience. Most of all, he knew the victim of this crime warranted a reaction.

"Who is that *Paladin*?!" the greenhorn rasped.

The victim was a Paladin. The body was so badly carbonized it was impossible to tell the gender, but the bits and pieces of Paladin armor that remained despite the hellish fire it was subjected to spoke of the victim's association with the Order. Yes, one of Arlos's holy disciples and trusted warriors, the sword and shield against all evil, the bastion of hope and trust for the forces of good—a Paladin—had been reduced to a heap of charcoal.

The question was: who was he? Or she? Who among their ranks had been slain? There was too little information to know.

"There's nothing left to identify them by," Cleric Cayman answered the young Paladin's high-pitched query. The slight quiver to his lips revealed his uncertainty on how to evaluate the terrifying reality facing them all. "The only physical material remaining is their armor, which has carbonized and partially dissolved. How could one of our valiant Paladins have been reduced to this...?"

After that conversation, Fjord and Cleric Cayman did an extensive investigation. First they checked to see if there were any personal effects or something they could use to identify the victim, but their search ended in vain. The face was thoroughly mangled, and whether that was intentional on the perpetrator's side or not, it rendered the victim indistinguishable.

The only fact they were able to confirm based on the armor was that the victim was either a Mesial or a High Paladin, which only underscored the gravity of the incident. A Mesial Paladin could take down a Lich, while a High Paladin

should be strong enough to slay a Lesser Dragon.

The damage the victim sustained ruled out any run-of-the-mill crook, which meant some fearsome monstrosity was running amok in their city. Or perhaps it was the work of a full-fledged criminal organization...

"Transfer the body to this parish's morgue," Fjord ordered. "I know it won't be easy, but please continue your autopsy there. If you learn anything, even the smallest detail, make sure you report it directly to me."

"I swear to Arlos that it will be done," Cleric Cayman vowed.

I hope this doesn't turn out to be far worse than anything I can imagine... Fjord thought, his mind racing with the possibilities: a vengeful spirit, an unknown demon, assassins from another country, and the list went on. The Divine Nation of Lenea was still highly unstable. *What kind of trial is God giving us under these already trying circumstances?*

Fjord headed straight to the cathedral to report this ineluctable incident to the Saints, overwhelming worry nipping at his heel as he hurried.



FJORD reported the case to the rulers of the new nation the day after the initial autopsy. It was a miracle he was even able to get an audience with the busy Saints, who were torn between their duties to manage the nation, hold religious rites, and negotiate with politicians and other influential parties. Only Veiled Saint Fenne could make any time for him on this occasion. Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials was unfortunately preoccupied with other business. And then there was Erakino, who showed up with the excuse that she had time to spare, revealing her curious nature.

Of course, Fjord welcomed her presence. Her mysterious powers and unique insight surpassed that of the Paladins, and her assistance had actually helped them discover countless injustices and set them right. To his dismay, her powers could do nothing to fix what had already come to pass.

"Whaaat?! A Paladin was killed? Seriously? Who did it?" Erakino asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

"We still don't know," Fjord replied, bracing himself for what he had to tell them. "What we do know is that the killer is still lurking within our holy city and that we need to bolster security. I will have more Paladins dispatched to guard you both, as well as Saint Soalina. It may be a bit suffocating with the heightened security measures, but I ask that you accept that it's for the best right now," he said, delivering his decision as the commander of Lenea's Order of

Paladins with a deep bow.

This wasn't a request, but an order. He couldn't allow any danger to befall the Saints during this critical juncture for the Divine Nation of Lenea. The infant country had no legs to stand on without the Saints. Fjord was concerned that some unfathomable danger was coming for the Saints, so he wanted to make absolutely certain they were safe no matter what came their way.

"Increasing security is the obvious choice. I'm more worried about increasing the load on the Paladins than any discomfort it might cause us," Veiled Saint Fenne said, agreeing with his decision with her quiet words of concern for him and his subordinates.

Reassured by the lack of surprise or disquiet in her delicate voice, Fjord immediately vowed she needn't concern herself with them. "You needn't worry about us, Saint Fenne. The Order exists to protect that which must be protected."

The Order of Paladins wouldn't bend or break under some extra pressure. The Saints were of greater concern. While they might surpass even a squadron of High Paladins in combat ability, they were still Human—letting one's guard down was inevitable. No mortal was capable of being on guard twenty-four seven. The Order of Paladins existed to fill any gaps in the Saints' defenses and protect their lives, even at the cost of their own.

Fenne's thoughts were drawn in a completely different direction from Fjord's. "With that said," she began, "who was it that died? I would like to express my condolences to the family. I believe a letter from a Saint, even one they don't personally know, might help to temporarily relieve their grief."

Fjord clamped his mouth shut, his earlier surge of resolution wilting. He should have said something along the lines of: "Think nothing of the sort. The bereaved family will surely be touched by your compassion and come one step closer to healing." Those would've been the correct words to say under normal circumstances. However...

"...I'm terribly sorry, Saint Fenne. We still don't know who was slain," he said, uttering the opposite of what he wished to say. He didn't deny or correct Fenne's intropunitive statement, offering only an apology instead. His unworthy response as the commander of the Order of Paladins and the sound of him grinding his teeth exposed his distress.

Fenne's brows knitted behind her veil. "...I can understand not knowing who the culprit is yet. But how is it that you don't know the identity of the victim? I understand the body wasn't in a recognizable state, but you were able to determine they were a Paladin, right?"

"We did determine as much, yes," Fjord nodded. "However, all of the Order's Paladins are currently fulfilling different missions, with some dispatched

to other regions. I have our men using every method available to us to contact everyone we have out in the field, but I am ashamed to admit that it hasn't netted us the results we were hoping for."

"I see. With fewer clergymen, it can't be easy," Fenne said quietly.

Paladins were never meant to be handling office work. Their job was to maintain public order within the parish they were assigned to, deal with military problems that occurred inside and outside their city, protect dignitaries, and defend against threats that may come from beyond their borders. With administrative work becoming their main focus of late, they were starting to grow sloppy with—or outright neglect—their primary duties, such as policing their assigned areas.

Fenne knew why—their drastic measures caused the system to buckle. Or perhaps it was simply taking a lot of time and effort on their part to repair the rotting government already in place.

Purging an astronomical number of corrupt clergymen meant they instantly lost everyone capable of doing clerical work. And putting in place a system of checks and balances to keep corruption in check made that much more work for those who remained. The worst part was that those fools burning in hell about now had actually been skilled when it came to accounting and bookkeeping.

If only that were their sole problem.

The Divine Nation of Lenea was too greedy. By aiming for perfect empire-management from the outset, they failed to account for the resulting confusion and problems that would inevitably arise from the upheaval, such as inadequate communication, mistakes in following protocol, forgetting who was in charge of what, and so on. The already established system had various measures in place to assist with each issue, but those were nonexistent during a mass reform that changed everything.

Their present instabilities as a nation left them without the basic, essential ability to know where one of their Paladins was and what circumstances surrounded their missions.

What if...the culprit behind this murder committed the crime knowing Lenea's circumstances? If they did, then we are up against someone with a frighteningly brilliant mind. With that thought racing through her mind, Fenne pondered over what their options were.

"M'kay! Shall everyone's favorite Erakino solve the problem right here and now?" Erakino piped up, offering salvation. "You probably already know this, Chiefy, but I'm actually the queen of handling such investigations! I just snap my fingers, and BAM! I've got our answer~♪!"

Erakino was the ace up their sleeve.

Just thinking about how monstrous their ally was brought a slight smile to Fenne's lips. The ability Erakino and her Game Master brought to the table was precisely what had allowed the three girls to do the impossible—establish the Divine Nation of Lenea.

An ability to force any situation to their desired outcome.

This ability wielded by the person Erakino called the Game Master could only be considered a power of the gods. Even if all seven Saints joined together, they would be forced to kneel before that power. Thus Lenea's invincibility.

Playing their favorite card here would render this incident's damage to Lenea void, as it had every other. And yet...

"I'm sorry, but I request you don't use your ability here, Lady Erakino," Fjord intervened, voice solemn.

"HUUUUUUH?!" Erakino blinked at him at rapid speed, as if that would help her understand his insane request. "Wh-Why? You don't want to know the truth???"

Fenne was of the same mind as Erakino on this matter. It was the height of folly not to use the options available to you. But Fjord carried himself in such a way that she could tell he wasn't saying it on a whim or some stupid sense of pride.

"Lady Erakino, to the Order of Paladins, every Paladin is a brother or sister who has sworn an oath of righteousness before God," Fjord explained, his stern expression every bit serious. A swirl of emotions filled his aging eyes. "We are God's sword and the people's shield. Our pride has been trampled upon by this incident. This isn't a problem that affects only Lenea's Order. Our lack of discretion has caused this apostasy against God."

Erakino and Fenne said nothing.

Lenea continued Qualia's tradition and history of being a nation built upon a religion centered around the Holy God Arlos. This meant they persisted in their war against evil and dedicated their lives and prayers to Arlos. From their point of view, an unjustified attack against a man of the cloth was taken as blasphemy against Arlos.

Fjord's desire was simple—he wanted the Order of Paladins to resolve the matter themselves. He was spurred into that mindset by a desire not to add to the Saints' workload and a personal outrage over the merciless murder of his comrade. More than anything else, he was driven by an irrational sense of justice that demanded the Paladins never lose to evil when they claimed to be the sword of God.

Even the man once extolled in the Southern Province as Fjord the Stalwart found his judgment impaired by his fanatical devotion to Arlos and his pride as

commander of Lenea's Order of Paladins.

"If something happens to a member of the Order," he continued, "then it is our job to exact God's wrath and clear our good name. We would be letting our brother down if we failed to do that much for him..." There was a short pause before he added, "That is not to say that I do not consider you one of us, Lady Erakino. However, this is one battle the Order must handle alone."

He bowed deeply. Someone of his rank and status shouldn't bow before others, but his request merited it. Still prostrate, he requested, "Please accept my decision on this matter," then fell silent.

Pride distorts a person's understanding of the nature of reality. Love, at times, can be foolish and unwavering. Those proverbs came to Fenne's mind as she listened to Fjord. *In this case, he's acting upon brotherly love, I suppose.* She let her eyes fall shut and decided to give him what he wanted.

"Grrr..." Erakino rumbled, unsatisfied with the situation.

Here she'd gone and offered a helping hand, and he slapped it away just like that. She didn't like that. Sure, she could understand where he was coming from. After all, if something happened to Soalina, she'd want to exact revenge personally. But the incident hadn't even reached the point of getting revenge yet. Judging by what Fjord had reported, they didn't even have a sliver of a clue who the victim or the culprit was. Was he even capable of making his valiant-sounding request a reality?

Besides, there was a chance that the victim was someone Erakino knew and spoke with. That alone bothered her, not to mention her growing concern that the culprit would take even more lives while they whittled away the time.

Frankly, she was worried about the Order of Paladins.

"Better luck next time, Erakino," Fenne interceded. "Let him handle this one. He's your favorite, right?"

Erakino didn't know what Fenne was thinking, but she could tell the other woman wanted to bring this conversation to a close. Nothing would change even if Erakino voiced her complaints. She'd learned just how stubborn and pigheaded this Saint and Paladin were during their time together.

Erakino let out a purposely loud, drawn-out sigh and threw her palms up to signal her defeat. "What am I gonna do with you two, eh? I'll let you have it your way this time, but be sure you come straight to your girl Erakino here the second you need help, 'kay? I need everybody around to get work done. The Order is forbidden from losing anyone else! You got it?"

"You have my heartfelt gratitude, Lady Erakino," Fjord said.

The conversation ended up concluding with nothing but a lingering unease.

Erakino wanted to resolve the matter at once and had planned on doing just

that. Still, she sympathized with Fjord. Stuck between those two sentiments as someone with little life experience, she found herself frustrated beyond belief.

“I’ll inform you about the new guard detail at a later point,” Fjord announced. “And I vow to you both on my pride as a Paladin that I will solve this case... Now then, if you will please excuse me.”

“Of course. May God’s blessing be with you,” Fenne said.

“Bye-bye!” Erakino waved.

Fjord departed with a textbook salute. Erakino took that as her cue to stroll over to the couch where Fenne was sitting and act coy. She was overwhelmed by the desire to talk to someone right now. She couldn’t shake the feeling that some unknown darkness was creeping in on them without anyone realizing it.

“Gee, it’s a total case of whodunnit, huh, Fenny? Oh, right, you don’t know what whodunnit is, do you? I’m talking about it being a total mystery here! A detective novel mystery~♪! Who has done it?!” she recited in her best investigator voice.

“About that, I’m sorry, but would you mind asking your Master for the answer now?”

“Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!” Erakino snapped her mouth shut as her cry echoed around the room.

The tables were suddenly turned. Erakino was left wondering what in the world their earlier conversation was for. It was Fenne herself who’d accepted Fjord’s request and persuaded Erakino to do the same.

The girl known as the Slurping Witch found herself in quite the mental quandary.

“Oh dear, did you not hear what I said? I told you to ask your Master for the answer,” Fenne reiterated.

“Dude, hold on! S-Stop right there! What about how Chiefy and the Paladins feel?! What was the point of that whole emotional conversation, then? You tots gave off an understanding Saint vibe! I mean, the guy just vowed on his pride that he’d solve the case!” Erakino ranted in an obnoxious fluster, earning an exasperated little sigh from Fenne.

“Pride, eh?” Fenne repeated, her tempered voice at odds with the hysterical Witch. “It sounds good the way he put it, doesn’t it? But we can’t risk the danger that accompanies such sentiments when we have so much at stake. People may very well die if he screws up.”

Erakino’s rational side completely understood and agreed with Fenne’s logic. She’d felt the same way not long ago, after all. Now it was her emotional side that had a hard time accepting it. Was it right to step all over Fjord’s warrior resolve as easily as throwing away a piece of tissue? Whose opinion should she

prioritize? She took the few moments Fenne was giving her to think it over to get in touch with her master to see what he thought.

“Hiya there, Master! Tell me, tell me! Which side do you think is right? I mean, I’m at a total loss here! What camp are you?”

The Game Master replied without delay—that he was on Fenne’s side. That fact intensified Erakino’s growing sense of isolation, plummeting her into a spiral of dark feelings. She believed that using the Game Master’s powers now was no different from belittling and betraying how Fjord and the Order felt. Just like Soalina and Fenne, she counted Lenea’s Paladins as her friends.

Was it really okay to act in bad faith and deceive the people she considered friends like this? Weren’t friends the sincere people who never betrayed or abandoned you until the bitter end?

If Soali was here, she’d side with me! As Erakino bristled with that childish thought, Fenne attempted to convince her like she might a young child.

“It’s okay. A little white lie is necessary sometimes. We will learn the truth and keep it to ourselves. We’ll only act on it if there’s an emergency...”

“But...that makes me feel guilty,” Erakino pouted.

“You’re as pure as they come, aren’t you?” Fenne said with a wry smile. “Then, why don’t we do this? I’m dying of curiosity. I *must* know the answer this instant. I’m forcing you into it out of my selfishness. You aren’t guilty of anything.”

That was a painful excuse.

Fenne was always a little stubborn, but she rarely went this far to get what she wanted. That just went to show how leery she was about the murder. And Erakino absolutely agreed it was dangerous for them to remain in the dark.

The Game Master’s ability was invincible and had already taken down Mynoghra’s Player, but another Player might’ve joined the game without them knowing it. Besides, it could be fatal to let someone else with a powerful ability get the drop on them.

The Game Master’s Arbiter ability outclassed everything they had come across so far. However, they shouldn’t let their guard down to put that theory to the test.

The Game Master had also joined Fenne in trying to persuade Erakino. He preferred to respect Erakino’s opinion, but he was obviously for learning what they were up against. It appeared no one was on Erakino’s side today.

“Please, Erakino,” Fenne pressed. “We need you and Master to use your powers to help Soalina continue to have a peaceful life.”

It left Erakino in an untenable position when she put it like that. Bringing Soalina up hit her right where it hurt. Fenne’s different approach partially helped

to convince her.

I feel like she just twisted me around her little finger, but meh, it shouldn't hurt if I jump on board, Erakino thought. Everyone was acting in each other's best interests, and so, Erakino made her decision to ask her master to use his ultimate power that put all other powers to shame.

"Hmph... Fine. You've forced my hand! It's really only because you asked! You hear me, Master?! Game Master! Make it quick! It's time to learn the full truth from the start by cheating, using exploits, and the trick of the trade! Gimme your full support, 'kay~♪? Divination!"

Erakino rolls 1d100=78 for Divination

Outcome: Success.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Outcome is a critical success regardless of the roll.

Outcome: Critical.

The whole truth, and nothing but the truth, was about to be laid bare before them. Every detail about the murderer and their intentions was theirs for the taking. Even the greatest clandestine spy couldn't avoid detection from the Game Master's transcendent ability.

Erakino squirmed with a hint of guilt and a whole lot of pleasure over being invincible. She concentrated with great interest on the results, curious about what secrets were about to be unveiled—

Result: The perpetrator of the Paladin's murder is unknown.

"...Huh?" she squeaked, her voice closer to a high-pitched shriek.

"What is it, Erakino?" Fenne asked. "Was it someone unexpected?"

Impossible. This can't be possible. It can't be. Erakino was so baffled by the results, her thoughts entered a broken loop. *What just happened?* That question plagued her with no answer and only bred further doubts. *Did we mess up somewhere?*

"O-Okay, then who died? You can find that much out, right?! C'mon, M-Master!" she shouted, but her Master was already working on it without her needing.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Requesting information.

Display the name of the victim in the Paladin Murder Case.

Result: The murdered Paladin is unknown.

The incarnation of darkness was right at their doorstep.

Chapter 2: True or False

<Town of Dragontan, Town Hall Meeting Room>

AROUND the same time the Paladin Murder Case had sent ripples of panic spreading through the Divine Nation of Lenea, Mynoghra was also running at full steam to resolve a myriad of problems.

“Thank you all for gathering. Our agenda for today’s meeting is none other than to decide what to do next...” Mynoghra’s wisest and most knowledgeable council member, Elder Moltar, cast his gaze around the table, signaling the start of the meeting. Strangely enough, the sage who usually acted as the facilitator of these meetings by providing wise insights, said no more. Instead, his eyes silently urged the twins to speak.

“Hello, I’m Caria, one of the two put in charge of Mynoghra during His Majesty’s absence.”

“I’m the second of the two, Maria!”

Two cheerful young voices resonated clearly through the fairly large meeting room. Something felt off about these girls leading the meeting, but they seemed to be in their element.

“I must admit...I didn’t expect His Majesty to directly appoint you both as his regents,” Elder Moltar remarked.

Gia and Emle both focused their attention on the twins as well. Dragontan’s mayor, Antelise, wasn’t in attendance since her duties only pertained to the town and not Mynoghra as a whole. The meeting consisted of its usual members apart from Takuto and Atou, but their roles had been massively overhauled. Put simply, the bottom of the Dark Elf hierarchy had become the top.

“We’ll do our bestest!” Maria crowed.

“His Majesty told us to, so we hafta do it,” Caria said, pausing for a long moment before saying, “Although we have our concerns...”

“I won’t oppose the king’s decision. We’ll do everything in our power to assist you girls, so you’d better live up to His Majesty’s expectations,” Elder Moltar advised, although it was clearer than day that he wholeheartedly objected to the king’s decision.

Caria suppressed a sigh, knowing the old sage would be a handful going

forward. Her thoughts idly wandered back to when Takuto gave her and Maria this assignment. She was displeased he asked it of them, but after interacting with the other Dark Elves in this capacity, she understood why he looked so troubled and was forced to agree that he'd made the right decision.

We were forced to replace you as regents because you're far too useless, gramps, Caria thought regarding Elder Moltar. *I agree with His Majesty's decision now.* She was certain her disrespectful thoughts hadn't shown on her face, but her older sister shot her a knowing smile from the seat beside her.

The cold, hard truth of the matter was that Elder Moltar and the rest of the Dark Elf adults were barely useful at this point. Between news of the surprise attack on their king and the loss of his life, the bitter reality that they couldn't do anything against their new enemy's mysterious powers, and the despair of losing their ultimate weapon—Hero Atou—none of the adults could get their heads on straight. Sure, the council members knew that Takuto had somehow escaped death, but the shock of that night still weighed heavily on them.

Takuto had sensed the turmoil running amok within the Dark Elves from his brief conversation with Elder Moltar on his way to invade the Saints' territory. Although this mission was one he'd planned to primarily handle on his own, he was still counting on them for backup. This wasn't the kind of mission with room for failure on the Dark Elves' part. Thus, Takuto suddenly amended his initial strategy and granted more authority to the Elfuur Sisters than originally planned.

The Elfuur Sisters were Witches. Witches weren't easily rattled. The hatred and regret that powered the twins didn't allow the weakness of inner turmoil to exist within them. Of course, they did still experience the dissatisfaction of being made to take on such a huge responsibility when they were still just kids. Those feelings still marked them as the children they were despite their nature as Witches.

All they felt at the moment was intense dissatisfaction and frustration.

"Anyways, Cary and Big Sista will do our very bestest as regents, so we'd be veryest happy if you followed our orders," Caria said to everyone in the room.

"Anybody who doesn't obey will be executed! Off with their heads!" Maria added cheerily, making a blade with her hand and dragging it along her throat in a cutting motion.

"Ack! Er, aye, aye, ma'am? Try not to let the tension get to you girls, okay?" Gia said, a tad unsettled by that declaration and gesture. After all, the smile didn't reach Maria's eyes. It appeared even Maria was annoyed with how undependable the adults had become.

Their meeting was taking place during the afternoon. Outside was bright and sunny, and the moon wasn't up. Even without the moon, these twin Witches were more than capable of making good on their threat.

"Let's begin with the status of things in Dragontan," Caria said, taking control of the meeting how Atou might. "Big Sis Emle, have you controlled the flow of information as instructed?"

"Y-Yes," Emle stammered. "We simply explained that the stage we set up in the plaza that day accidentally caught fire. The townspeople seem satisfied with that explanation, but the people closest to us are starting to grow suspicious because of all the unusual activity of late. Not seeing His Majesty or Lady Atou around is another cause for concern on their part."

"I was able to give a believable explanation to the Dark Elves back in the Accursed Lands, but it won't be so easy to convince those living in Dragontan," Elder Moltar explained. "We need to come up with a real solution fast."

The turmoil disrupting Mynoghra had settled over the last couple of days. Or rather, most people didn't know much about what had happened. They were in a fairly good position all things considered. That much was a given, with the Dark Elves being masters of working behind the scenes when they used to serve the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals. Controlling information was child's play to them. They also had several Brain Eaters able to keep public order at an all-time high assigned to Dragontan.

Things were currently surprisingly calm enough to make anyone wonder if anything had even gone wrong. This strong control over the masses was one of the inconspicuous but important powers of Mynoghra.

"Our job is to continue to maintain domestic affairs," Caria said. "Key figures in our government will need to know certain things, so we'll review what information to share and get back to you..."

Things wouldn't stay calm forever—they needed to act before trouble arose.

Caria drew on her memory of the agenda the king had given her before he left. She explained its contents to the others as she glanced at her amused sister. "Also, I believe we need to explain the situation to Phon'kaven. His Majesty gave his consent on that front, so I'll handle it with Big Sista."

"They might pose a bigger problem than our domestic affairs," Gia said. "They seem to have sensed something is amiss and haven't complained yet, but it might negatively affect the relationship between our two countries if we don't have an official discussion with them."

Caria nodded in agreement with Gia.

Mynoghra had built a solid alliance with Phon'kaven, but that's all they

were—allied nations. Depending on the situation, Mynoghra might even have to show they still had the upper hand. Their alliance was built upon a treaty and mutual benefit. And given Mynoghra's situation, they might need to request Phon'kaven's cooperation in some things. Phon'kaven might get it in their head to use this moment of weakness to negotiate better terms.

And that was the least of their worries...

"Qualia's Saints were behind this affront against our great empire," Gia spat bitterly. "We must consider the possibility of going to war with them too. That possibility has the highest chance of becoming a reality."

As Gia said, the likelihood of going to war was inevitable. None of them knew what strategies the King of Ruin had in mind, but they were bound to go to war with the forces of good on some scale or another. In which case, Mynoghra needed to drag Phon'kaven as their ally into battle because they lacked the populace to wage a full-scale war.

A few strong warriors could only win so much against the force of sheer numbers. Mynoghra was especially vulnerable without Atou. The situation was dire, to say the least.

"We need to discuss that matter with Phon'kaven, too," Elder Moltar agreed. "They likely don't want to pick a fight with other countries, but that's no longer an option for us."

"We plan to make the necessary concessions on that front," Caria said. "If they're reluctant, the least they can do is just keep their eyes peeled for any trouble affecting our territories within the Dark Continent."

After that discussion, additional topics pertaining to empire-management were brought up and decided on. All of the twins' policies and decisions played it safe: they would continue to dedicate resources to restoring and maintaining domestic affairs and work closely with their vital allies. Aside from those two points, they would also act according to the orders they received from Takuto on a regular basis.

There wasn't anything particularly special or flagrant about their plans. Except, Mynoghra's empire-management council had been rendered incapable of making even those basic decisions without the twins and Takuto. The situation was far from good, but everything was bound to work out as long as the twins were there.

"By the way...how is our king faring out there?" Elder Moltar asked the twins. "Is Lady Atou all right?"

The topic changed to what they were all really there to hear about. Curiosity gleamed in the adults' eyes as they fastened them on the girls, hoping to glean even the slightest detail.

What is there for them to worry about? Caria wondered, her thoughts revealing how inhuman her emotions had become. Still, trying to mislead them would only add to her annoyance, so she let out a puff of air and tossed the others a bone.

“His Majesty’s staying in a village located in Qualia—or rather, what’s calling itself the Divine Nation of Lenea now. The region used to be called the Southern Province. The people who attacked Mynoghra are there.”

The situation in Lenea was changing faster than the wind blew. The very foundation their enemy stood on seemed to change by the day. Caria told the council members everything she knew at this point, starting from how some of the Saints had defected from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia and used the achievement of defeating the King of Ruin as grounds to establish a new nation. She also explained how their new country was built upon the land that was formerly Qualia’s Southern Province.

“The Southern Province, you say?” Elder Moltar stroked his beard. “That region’s nothing but boundless fertile land. I’m stunned Qualia would let them secede. What’s even more infuriating is that they dare build their empire upon falsehoods about our king’s defeat! What arrogance! What insolence!” he began shouting. “It gets my blood boiling! And besides that! Why didn’t you girls tell us such an important detail sooner?!”

“It was next on the agenda.” Maria shrugged.

“And if we’re to put the blame on anyone, it’d be the rest of you for asking questions before we were finished,” Caria pointed out drolly.

Elder Moltar blanched at that accurate accusation. He had to be embarrassed, realizing he’d forced an important meeting off-topic before they were finished simply because he was too restless to focus on the agenda at hand. All of the adult council members became acutely aware of their antsiness when they saw Elder Moltar get outsmarted by their youngest members.

Unfortunately, even if they were aware of their deeply rooted insecurities, they couldn’t do anything to stop their crippling anxiety after witnessing their king get slain before their eyes. In their current state, they couldn’t carry out the king’s mission.

Gia forcefully changed the conversation to clear the dark air before their thoughts became even more self-destructive. “But if the king has gone to do the deed himself, then the enemy is doomed. In fact, he might’ve already taken back Lady Atou.”

His viewpoint was an optimistic one, but it also revealed his absolute trust in King Takuto. None of the Dark Elves had ever seen the King of Ruin fight. But there was no way a being capable of leading the all-powerful Sludge Atou,

the now lost Queen of Bugs, and countless other indomitable subordinates, could be weak.

“It isn’t that easy,” Caria said, promptly shutting down Gia’s optimism. Her tone almost seemed to be warning them not to be overly hopeful.

“Why not?!” Elder Moltar roared, unable to believe anything could be hard for their king.

“Have you already forgotten what the enemy’s capable of?” Caria shot him a scathing look. “Yes, His Majesty came out of the incident unscathed. But we still let them take Atou from us.”

Elder Moltar groaned and fell silent, proving her argument left no room for objection.

“His Majesty doesn’t know what the enemy’s capable of. He said he knows nothing and won’t retaliate until he has countermeasures against their skills. So it might take some time before the deed is done,” Caria conveyed with a grave expression.

Her words brought an avalanche of worry down upon Mynoghra’s council members, making the room feel as heavy as if they were holding a funeral.

Caria mostly made up everything she had just told them. King Takuto didn’t say any of that, nor did he give her a detailed explanation of the situation in Lenea. Even if they asked for details, he refused to tell them.

Caria glanced sideways at her older sister. The smiling girl, taking advantage of the grown-ups looking down in pensive thought, put her index finger to her lips and gave a devilish grin.

They had every intention of distorting all information pertaining to their king. He’d told them to do as much himself.

It wasn’t that he didn’t trust the Dark Elves. Caria and Maria understood he took these measures as a precaution against their enemy’s unusual abilities.

The twins weren’t present for the enemy’s surprise attack, so they didn’t see what had happened for themselves, but they were informed of all the details. From that, they’d determined that the enemy possessed some sort of absurd ability that required prudent planning to go up against. So, they intentionally wove falsehoods into their explanations to deceive the enemy as much as themselves.

Even speaking the truth deep in their own base of operations, where the highest counterintelligence security measures were in place, was risky against their current opponent.

“Then what about you two?” Elder Moltar asked, jabbing a finger at the twins. “I know you’ve inherited Lady Isla’s powers. Can’t you handle that mysterious ability of theirs with a Hero’s powers?”

“Too difficult,” Maria said. “The enemy’s ability’s unknown. I can’t make them Forget something I don’t understand.”

“Good point, Big Sista,” Caria agreed. “...Even if we were to fight at our full strength, we’ll likely lose to their ability. After all, Atou was Brainwashed without a fight.”

“I see...” Elder Moltar said, disappointed.

The twins had learned the hard way how dangerous an unknown ability could be the moment they lost their foster mother—Isla—to a similar phenomenon. They had tasted firsthand the dominating effects of a force that defies and bends the laws of nature to its whim. Sheer strength or mere wisdom could do nothing against such a phenomenon.

Just as Mynoghra’s King Takuto Ira possessed godlike powers to rule his empire and dark minions, so too did his enemies possess mysterious powers of a godly nature.

There’s no guarantee the enemy can’t extract information from us. That’s why His Majesty’s purposely distorting the information he sends back or not answering at all, Caria realized.

The game was no longer a simple competition of strength—it had shifted to swindling each other by hiding your best cards and faking the other player out. Only the Dark Elves were left completely in the dark. It was a bit cruel to expect them to read between the lines under the circumstances.

“Why doesn’t His Majesty rely on us?” Elder Moltar asked, his tone mournful. “Why won’t he reveal his divine intentions to us? We would die before we betray our king. Does he view us as so useless we aren’t worth informing of his plans?”

“I think it’s because he doesn’t want to lose anyone else,” Caria answered. “Several Dark Elf Warriors died in the line of duty during the surprise attack. They weren’t weaklings and yet they couldn’t even put up a fight.”

“Even the buggies and the birdmen died. Surely His Majesty would be heartbroken to lose more,” Maria sniffled, tears shimmering in her big, round eyes.

Caria jumped from her seat and threw her arms around her older sister. “Please don’t cry, Big Sista. You’ll make Cary cry too...”

The girls embraced as they tried to suppress their sobs.

Of course, they were just going with the flow. Everything was a lie—a story they made up on the fly. They didn’t feel the slightest bit sad, and even their tears were squeezed out as part of the act. But this was the right way to handle people. They had the feeling this was how their king lied and manipulated them as well.

“Your Majesty...to think you care for us so! Blighted Saints! I curse our uselessness!” Gia lamented.

Were the grown-ups so easily deceived by the twins’ little performance? Or were they just blinded by their sorrow and self-pity? Either way, their expressions crumpled with a mix of emotions. Caria and Maria were going for that reaction, but they felt a flood of worry seeing how easily fooled the adults were.

“What benevolence! What grace! The king cares so much for us! He’s going to such lengths for us!” The elderly sage let a torrent of tears cascade down his wrinkled cheeks in an eruption of emotion, unaware of the twins’ scheme.

The adults had become especially reliant on King Takuto since becoming citizens of Mynoghra and this was the price of that reliance.

The twins watched the pathetic grown-ups fall apart with a frigid glint in their eyes. Children are forced to grow up fast when nothing but useless adults are around. But their pathetic instability wasn’t what mattered here.

Caria thought about the situation as she continued to embrace her older sister. *Our mission from here out is to distort information and deceive each other. No one knows what is true or false...*

What methods did the enemy use to launch their surprise attack on Mynoghra? How did the king revive unscathed after having his heart pierced? Why did the king march alone into enemy territory?

What did the king know and what was he planning to do?

The answers to all those questions were still locked in the confines of darkness. They would surely never see the light of day until after everything was resolved.

I have to do my bestest not to get deceived along the way too... Caria’s thoughts shifted to the most important fact of them all: *After all, His Majesty is taking action for the first time ...*

Truths and falsehoods were weaving together in a blanket of deception that would inevitably fall upon the twins as well. For only Mynoghra’s King Takuto Ira knew the whole truth.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Witches of Regret, the Elfuur Sisters have become the temporary Commander of Mynoghra. During this period, Takuto Ira will be removed as Commander.

Interlude: Disguise

THEIR meetings went in circles, but fortunately ended with them making some progress—albeit at a snail’s speed. Mynoghra’s empire-management was finally getting back on track with the Elfuur Sisters at the helm, following King Takuto’s instructions.

Still, it’s normal for things not to go exactly according to plan. Managing any kind of organization often leads to discovering a variety of small-scale problems when putting plans into action, derailing progress until they are dealt with.

“It’s time we let the world know His Majesty is alive and wellest,” Caria announced to the council members.

“Hrm? Why would we do that?” Elder Moltar asked. “Very few people know the king was attacked, and those who do are aware he’s fine. The only ones who don’t know are...the culprits behind the attack—those godforsaken Saints,” he cursed.

“We want those Saints to know,” Caria said.

“We’re gonna confuuuuze the enemy,” Maria added.

“That makes sense,” Gia interjected. “From what I’ve heard, the Divine Nation of Lenea is still in its infancy. They practically forced their secession from Qualia using their so-called divine achievement of defeating the King of Ruin. So your plan’s to shake things up for them by purposely spreading news of His Majesty’s good health?”

“Exactly,” Caria nodded. “They believe they defeated His Majesty. It should put them a little on edge if they hear he’s alive and out there.”

“They won’t know if it’s the truth or a lie,” Maria giggled.

Mynoghra’s domestic affairs were rock solid, leaving nothing for outsiders to exploit. So their strategy was to use that to their advantage and launch an intelligence attack against the Saints’ shaky empire.

“We don’t need to deal direct damage to our enemies,” Caria explained. “All we need is to invite insecurity and alarm into their midst. If all goes wellest, His Majesty will exploit that weakness.”

None of the council members knew the king’s plans. Knowing his genius, he must’ve factored in that the twins would take such actions since he’d granted them a great deal of authority over Mynoghra. Only King Takuto would know if

their plans to sew confusion into the Saints' ranks was of any use, but at the very least, it shouldn't disrupt his plans.

"Hm, I suppose that means there's no cost to us even if we fail to induce turmoil in our enemy's ranks?" Gia asked. "...But wait, I need to process this first."

Gia was about to agree with the twins' plan, thinking that it didn't have any disadvantages for them, but then another problem came to mind.

"This poses the same problem we had figuring out how to manipulate information regarding the surprise attack," Gia continued, getting his thoughts in order. "Sure, we can put out an edict in the king's name, letting the world know he's alive and well. But doubts will still remain if no one sees him. How do you plan to resolve that hiccup?"

It was a sound argument. They could release all the information they wanted under the king's name, but people would doubt it until they actually saw him for themselves. This simple method would go over just fine domestically. Takuto rarely went out as it was, so his people wouldn't think twice about it.

The forces of good were another story. They were liable to investigate and uncover the truth that no one had seen him since the attack. They needed to prevent that—fortunately, the twins already had a countermeasure in mind.

"Big Sister Emle," Caria said, calling on Emle.

"Ah! Yes, ma'am? H-How can I help you?" Emle's head shot up. She wasn't involved much in today's meeting, so she was shocked when they suddenly called on her.

Caria didn't seem particularly bothered by Emle's almost amusing reaction as she nonchalantly ordered, "From tomorrow onward, you'll be His Majesty."

"WHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA?!"

Further chaos was invited into the meeting room with that hysterical cry.



A couple of hours had gone by. The same group of council members were still holed away in the meeting room, with an additional unfamiliar face among them. Or rather, it was a familiar face, wearing familiar attire, resulting in an entirely unfamiliar appearance.

"Uggggh... I'm too lacking to assume the king's awe-inspiring appearance!!" bemoaned Emle, disguised as King Takuto. She sounded like she was on the verge of crying underneath the same cloak the King of Ruin always wore.

The clothes were tailor-made for her and she donned a special domino mask, hoping that would help her pull off the disguise. She had a similar stature to King Takuto, so it'd be hard for anyone to claim she was someone else if they announced the king had changed his attire. As far as the mask went, they could easily pass it off as their merciful king taking extra measures to help the weak-minded who often fainted and foamed at the mouth when he made eye contact with them. It was already considered an unspoken taboo for people to look him in the eye, so that was an easy excuse.

General consensus gave her perfect passing marks as the king's body double. All they had left to do was choose the right time for her to appear in disguise.

"You're the bestest pick because you're the same size," Caria pointed out. "You can continue to work on important government documents dressed like that too, so it's a win-win."

"Blegh...that's not very reassuring..." Emle whimpered, her shoulders slumping in despair.

Caria thought Emle looked just like Takuto did whenever he was scolded by Isla, which made her both satisfied and a tad delighted she'd pulled off the disguise better than they could've hoped for.

"Stop slouching! Can't you sit up straight?! Do you honestly believe you can fulfill the esteemed role of His Majesty's body double acting like that?!"

An annoying old man just had to go and ruin what Caria thought looked perfectly like Takuto with his prompt nagging and biased demands. Both Caria and Emle grimaced and shot Elder Moltar dirty looks. Emle even found herself bitterly thinking, *Then why don't you try to pull off this disguise and see how uncomfortable it makes you?!*

No one had the right to complain when they weren't the one donning the guise of the great and mighty King of Ruin, the object of their reverence and fear, who'd saved them all and given them a future. But Emle knew challenging Elder Moltar's nagging wouldn't get them anywhere. She didn't have the kind of personality that felt confident arguing with others, so she settled with showing her ire through body language alone. Although it appeared even that decision left her open to more nitpicking.

Annoying Mansplainer Number 2—also known as Warrior Captain Gia—threw his hat into the ring to take the next stab at her.

"The biggest problem is your lack of a powerful presence," he criticized, arms folded at his chest like he'd suddenly become an expert on the topic. "Setting aside our king's appearance, he's a completely different monster on the inside. The king I know and love is bigger, bolder, and makes your soul quiver

just being in his presence. I'm only stating the obvious here, but Emle can't even imitate less than a quarter a percent of that power."

He was acting like a bigshot who knew everything there was to know about their king, and his foolhardy attitude blinded him to the landmine he was about to throw himself upon.

"Not having any breasts is your only saving grace," he continued, making a lewd hand gesture. "Anybody would be able to tell you're a woman if you actually had peckers! HAHAAAAHA!"

The normally meek and nonconfrontational Emle exploded at that comment. The absolutely insensitive pig of a man in front of her had just uttered the one phrase no one should ever say to a Dark Elf woman.

"Care to say that again?" Emle dared him, her words seething, her gaze sharper than any blade as it fleeced Gia. She overflowed with bloodlust ten times worse than usual, everything about her posture hinting that she'd lunge at him and pummel her fists into his face the moment she saw an opening.

"...W-Well, whaddya know? You can incite a smidgen of the dread the king does," Gia coughed.

"Can I execute him?" Emle asked, dead serious. "I might just be His Majesty's body double, but I am the acting king at the moment. I have every right to execute this pig, don't I?"

"Please give the execution order, Your Majesty!" Caria exclaimed.

"We'll approve it!" Maria smiled wickedly.

Dark Elf women generally had small breasts. This was a racial characteristic and not something they could fix through effort. Touching on the topic was guaranteed to set them off faster than lit dynamite. Any intelligent man knew better than to mess with that powder keg.

"Come now, don't be so hasty, Emle," Elder Moltar intervened. "This fool's still useful, so please hold off your execution. You can string him up for all I care once His Majesty returns."

"You will regret your words as you suffer miserably," Caria hissed.

"We'll mount your head on a pike for all to see!" Maria jeered.

To make matters worse, Mynoghra's pride and joy, Sludge Atou, also had a modest chest and felt a kinship with the Dark Elf women in that regard. Even King Takuto never commented on such things—he was a decent enough man to recognize that it was highly insensitive to make cracks about a woman's body. Not even Elder Moltar dared aid Gia under such circumstances. Gia had no allies here.

"B-Boy, oh, boy, did I get you good! I was j-just kidding. Hahaha," Gia laughed dryly. "Emle perfectly pulls off that disguise! I really believe that! I

do!”

“Will you *shut* up? I will discuss your punishment with His Majesty as soon as he returns.”

Emle silenced Gia’s shameless excuse-making with her sharp tone. Then she let the topic go to concentrate on fulfilling her role as King Takuto’s body double. There was no use whining about something that needed to be done. She would pull off her role perfectly until the end.

“Can we get back on topic now? What should I do if someone talks to me?” Emle asked. “His Majesty and I have completely different voices. I’m fairly positive the ruse will be up the second I speak...”

“You needn’t worry about that,” Caria responded as if there was no need to even ask.

“Why not?” Emle asked, baffled by her response.

It killed Emle to admit it, but she pulled off King Takuto’s physical appearance pretty well. And her face would be covered by the mask, making that a non-issue. But their voice difference was a huge issue. She couldn’t imitate King Takuto’s voice—they were too different. This could be the problem that unraveled their whole plan—or so she thought.

“Because His Majesty doesn’t speak to strangers,” Caria replied simply.

“Stranger danger!” Maria cheered.

“...O-Oh...”

The problem was resolved in the unlikeliest of ways.

An awkward silence filled the room. And thus, the meeting came to a close in a somewhat incomplete manner. Saying anything further would be digging their own graves. Even the frazzled Dark Elf grown-ups had enough sense in them to show that much consideration for their socially awkward king.



Idoragya's Seven Great Savior
Saints:

Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials
Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair
The Scribe Saint
The Mystic Saint

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Description

Saints are special units. Only 7 can exist in the world at the same time and they all have been blessed with powerful skills and combat strength by God.

At present, they are each acting according to their individual beliefs, which may not necessarily contribute to world peace or prosperity.

The currently known Saints are listed above.

Chapter 3: Awakening

ARE ideals never meant to be realized? Can nothing be done without sacrifice?

Since the dawn of time, Saints have always offered something to the Gods in exchange for their sainthood. Soalina's odd attachment to Erakino was partly due to what she'd sacrificed. Fenne had also sacrificed a piece of herself to God when she was chosen as his Saint.

Is wanting to be happy really that wrong? Is wanting people to live peacefully without sorrow or suffering such an exorbitant wish that it necessitates being given such difficult trials?

Veiled Saint Fenne absentmindedly listened to Commander Fjord's report as she searched for the answers to her unspoken questions.

"That concludes my overview of the most pressing activity in neighboring countries. The Order and I will handle the rest," Fjord said.

Just how reliable is he? Fenne wondered. Fjord hadn't solved a single thing to do with the Paladin Murder Case since his little tirade the other day. If anything, their problems had only multiplied in the time since. *What in the world am I doing at a time like this?*

"The King of Ruin, Takuto Ira, was spotted alive and well in Dragontan, they say? Do you think it's really him?" Fenne asked, doubtful.

"It's likely a fake. That's the quickest method to suppress domestic turmoil," Fjord replied without pausing to think about it.

Did the Order of Paladins already investigate the matter? Or did he prepare his answer in advance, expecting her to ask about it?

Fenne was fairly confident in her ability to read people, but she couldn't discern anything from Fjord right now.

"Fjord," she said, her tone stern. Her hawklike gaze searched his face from beneath the veil. "Where did you get that intel from? I've heard the Order is swamped lately."

It almost sounded like she was grilling him for answers, but Fjord didn't seem to mind. "Dragontan has always had close relations with Qualia," he replied. "We still have several means of obtaining information from them even after they have fallen under Mynoghra's control. This information was also received from one of those sources."

"I see..."

Fjord was startled when he realized Fenne had softly moved aside her veil to look at him with just one eye. He was stunned by her suddenly revealing her skin for the first time since he'd known her and even more so by the sliver of deformed flesh he glimpsed just under the veil.

He quickly tried to smooth things over by using his already gaping mouth to ask, "I-Is something the matter?"

"No, nothing's wrong. I'm sorry for adding to your workload when you're already so busy. Please continue to investigate the matter... I especially want to know if the King of Ruin is really alive or not. Sooner rather than later, if possible."

"Understood. I know of several capable people outside of the Order who would serve us well in this matter. They will expect a lofty reward in exchange, but I'll bring them in on this."

"Please do."

Fjord withdrew from the room, leaving only Veiled Saint Fenne and silence in his wake.

"Were you able to confirm anything?" Fenne asked, addressing the empty room as if someone else was there.

Cancel Camouflage.

People suddenly appeared in that empty space.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority to Request Information.

Fjord the Stalwart doesn't know who the culprit is.

Fjord the Stalwart isn't hostile toward the Divine Nation of Lenea.

Fjord the Stalwart hasn't been Brainwashed or Confused.

Fjord the Stalwart didn't lie during the last conversation.

Fenne shifted her gaze to the two new presences in the room. Standing right beside the sofa where she sat was Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Slurping Witch Erakino.

"I just checked with Master," Erakino said. "Good ol' Chiefy is in the clear! In other words, he's not working for anybody, been Brainwashed, or had any other funny business done to him."

"I see. I've done something terrible to him then," Fenne said, regret lacing her angelic voice with the ability to charm all who heard it. "...It's miserable having to doubt the people we should trust."

“No one would blame us considering the circumstances, Saint Fenne,” Soalina said gently, attempting to console Fenne’s guilty conscience. Her words were meant to comfort and reassure them all, but they rang hollow because actions speak louder than words.

The three girls didn’t doubt Fjord personally—they suspected the entire Order of Paladins. Several days had already passed since Fjord declared he would resolve the case, and yet, not only did the culprit remain a mystery, but so too did the victim.

To make matters worse, the Order had covered up the existence of a second victim. Was the Order concealing information out of a short-sighted desire to protect their reputation? Or was something shady going on behind the scenes? The girls didn’t know the answer. They did know that the Order was incapable of solving the case, leading them to take measures into their own hands and use any means available to them to identify the culprit and victim themselves.

Except, their results weren’t much better than the Order’s.

The answer eluded them even after the Game Master exercised his Authority, rendering all their inferences and speculations from various angles futile.

Fenne stared out the window. The sun smiled down upon them from high in the blue sky, birds sang to each other, and the voices of people happily going about their day trickled into the room from below.

What she saw at a glance was the ideal country that’s peaceful, tranquil, free of exterior threats, and devoid of fear. Despite how it appeared on the surface, this country of theirs was under attack by an unknown entity.

“Erakino, can you look into the King of Ruin?” Fenne asked. “I highly doubt he could revive from the state we left him in, but we should double check...”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority to request the status of the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira.

Result: Unknown.

“Takuto Ira is an unknown,” Erakino relayed with a big sigh, shaking her head. “We can’t confirm anything on him one way or another.”

The past few days had turned up nothing but equally disappointing results. Both the Game Master, who attempted to find the answers to their questions, and Erakino, who had to relay the results to the Saints, exuded fatigue even if they

didn't complain about it.

"If his status is unknown, doesn't that mean he's alive?" Soalina asked. "I think the fact that the truth is being withheld is a sign that he's doing something to disrupt the information..."

"You've got it all wrong, Soali," Erakino said. "Neither Master nor I completely understand how the game system works, so we don't know what'll happen when a Player dies."

"That's a valid point," Soalina nodded.

"Besides that, it's extremely difficult for us to influence Players and their direct subordinates from different games," Erakino explained. "Our thought is that the different game systems clash, making it harder to affect each other. According to Master, it's impossible to have the same level of influence over them at a distance than when we're up close and personal."

Erakino and the Game Master had revealed their origins to the two Saints. They explained how they came to this world with the powers from a tabletop role-playing game and that there were likely multiple people with similar circumstances out there. They also let them know that they were playing a game with those people to determine who would be the winner. At first, the Saints were skeptical about their far-fetched story, but they eventually came to believe what they were saying was true.

The Ancient Saints' Book of Oracles had a passage terrifyingly titled: "The Beginning of the End." It depicted a battle between the gods taking place in their world. If the prophecies contained within the *Book of Oracles*, considered dubious tales and hyperbole, were to be believed, then they hinted at the entire continent becoming embroiled in a big war.

The loser would lose everything and the winner would gain it all.

The three girls couldn't become the losers—not when their people were counting on them. The die had already been cast, and their pieces had advanced to the point of no return.

"In the end, no matter what angle we go from, we still don't know the answers. I suppose it was a mistake not to check the corpse when we had the time and ability because we were full of ourselves," Fenne muttered, her frustration apparent in the way she clenched and unclenched her hands.

Disheartened by her words, Soalina hung her head and stared at her hands. Wanting to cheer her friend up, Erakino leaped from her seat, drawing their eyes to her.

"But! But Soali's awesome-possum attack did Takuto Ira in good. There ain't no way he's coming back from that! Not after what I saw. Don't you agree, Soali?"

“I do,” Soalina nodded. “The King of Ruin was undoubtedly reduced to ashes by God’s holy flames. I can say that with certainty. However...what if...” she trailed off.

Was it a mistake not to confirm Takuto’s corpse with their own eyes? Absolutely. But who would honestly think he could’ve survived the two-pronged death they put him through? They had thrown everything they had at him to make absolutely certain he was dead and then burned the body to make doubly sure. If they started doubting his death, then all their plans built upon that supposition would crumble.

Takuto Ira had irrefutably died. They had killed him then and there—they had determined as much at the time of their attack. But now that conclusion was giving away like sand between their fingers.

“We don’t know if Takuto Ira is dead or alive,” Fenne said. “But we do know that there’s a real threat to us right now. I haven’t a clue why this enemy is taking the tedious route of targeting individual Paladins, but that doesn’t change the fact that they are *here* hurting us.”

They had already used the Game Master’s ability to investigate what forces posed a threat to Lenea. Both Qualia and El-Nah were currently on the wait-and-see-what-happens list, and none of the nations or tribes on the Dark Continent were hostile toward Lenea yet. The process of elimination narrowed them down to only one possibility: the empire that the system prevented them from obtaining information on—Mynoghra. The nation they had left to self-destruct, thinking it’d never become a threat, was now looming ominously in the background.

“What in Arlos’s holy world is causing these problems?” Soalina asked.

The most conceivable answer was...that Takuto Ira had other, more powerful subordinates. They had confirmed that the King of Ruin originated from a simulation game at the time of his assassination. Sludge Atou, the one subordinate of his that they had gotten their hands on, was classified as a Hero from that game. If they considered the possibility of other Heroes like her, one could’ve assumed the role of King of Ruin and taken control of Mynoghra.

When the Saints heard the Game Master’s theory through Erakino, they grimaced. They were angry that they weren’t informed of other Heroes or that one such Hero could take over as the King of Ruin. But it was too late to change what had come to pass.

If anything, the Game Master, Erakino, and both of the Saints were all at fault for being in positions where they had access to any information they wanted, but didn’t even think to look into things further than they had before launching an attack against another nation. Just because you have the ability to

know everything doesn't mean you can come up with the best solution for everything.

The vague existence of a potential enemy gradually took shape.

"All of us from different games come equipped with super deadly, super uber powers," Erakino explained. "And out of all of 'em, Master's Arbiter ability is practically invincible. But, that doesn't mean the rest are gonna just go belly-up for us... If there's still an enemy left out there, we gotta deal with 'em quick."

In fact, Erakino had been brought to the brink of defeat during their surprise attack against the King of Ruin. The Dark Elves had been equipped with modern firearms, and Takuto responded instantly to their attack with a swift counter. They had won by a hair, which meant they couldn't be overly optimistic.

Erakino's monologue made the two Saints sense the encroaching danger. The trials they had to overcome were far from over.

"The especially bad thing for us is that this means Mynoghra will continue to be an active presence. Uh, if I remember this right, it's a super important accomplishment that we have defeating the King of Ruin tied to our name, right, Fenny?" Erakino asked.

"That's right," Fenne said. "If Mynoghra, the nation led by the King of Ruin, is still going strong, then it will call doubt upon our legitimacy as a nation. And in the off chance that the King of Ruin still lives, then everything we have built upon will crumble from its foundation. If that were to happen, then we would become insurrectionists who founded a nation with false declarations. Not only will we be excommunicated, but hunted as heretics as well, I'm sure."

"Well, don't count us out, because Eraki and Co's turn ain't over yet, baby!" Erakino declared in a singsong voice. "After all, we've got an ace up our sleeve that we didn't have before~♪!"

"An ace? What might that be, Erakino?" Fenne asked.

"Heh-heh-heh! You know the one! That good ol' one! The special one!"

"...I'm sorry, I don't?"

Both Saints gave her a puzzled look. Erakino burst out laughing at the cute way they tilted their heads in unison. She spun around in a circle, lightening the tense mood in the room with her playfulness.

"Without much ado, let's invite our special guest! Everyone, give a big round of applause for Mynoghra's Sludge Atou!!"

Erakino decided to play the ultimate ace up her sleeve.



SHE had been dreaming. A dream where someone was speaking to her from the deepest depths of darkness where shadows and night didn't exist. Whatever was there was huge, terribly scary, and seemed just a little troubled...

What was it saying to her? She tried to remember, but her memories were such a jumbled blur, it was hard to piece together in the haze. The one thing she knew for sure was that whatever it was, its words left her with a kind impression.

"...Where...am I?"

Atou regained consciousness. She felt as if she had been having a very important dream, but she couldn't remember any of it. She assessed her surroundings to figure out her situation and quickly learned exactly where she was and who she was with.

"You...!" she hissed with venomous hatred and extended one of her tentacles to pierce right through the frivolously grinning Witch standing right before her... But then, her aggression was dispelled by some mysterious force like the air escaping from a popped balloon.

Her attack wasn't stopped—Atou herself had willingly chosen to stop attacking.

"Tch, tch, tch," the Witch clicked her tongue and wiggled her finger at Atou. "Now that we're allies, friendly fire isn't allowed, sweet lil' defanged Atouy! We've basically just NTRed you, girl! So why don't you forget your past BF and get it on with us girls? We've all been waiting eagerly for you to join us~♪!"

Atou raked her gaze around the room. Her memories returned once she confirmed the two Saints cautiously watching her like a hawk. She was filled with regret for having personally harmed her precious master and the painful realization that the three girls who should be her greatest enemies...registered in her mind as allies. Atou understood then and there that some power had changed her affiliation, forcing her to view Mynoghra as an enemy territory she could never return to.

"I think I just threw up a little..." Atou said, coughing into her hand. "I can't believe I not only can't attack you, but that I don't even have the desire to. Gross. How does it feel? Are you euphoric, trampling all over your opponent's dignity and existence like this?"

"Good question. I couldn't say either way," Erakino responded flippantly. "We're just desperate, you know? We need power and results to make our dreams a reality, so we made a dangerous gamble to go after the most

convenient source for both. And we ended up obtaining it all in the end, so yeah~♪.”

Both Witches spoke with a sharp, biting edge to their words, but the deadly tension had dissipated. It was now more akin to a conversation between teammates who didn’t get along well and made everyone else uncomfortable around them.

The abilities granted by the game system were absolute.

Atou, who’d been forcefully switched to the Saints’ faction by Erakino’s Slurp ability, was now completely on their side despite her defiant attitude.

“Power and results, eh?” Atou drawled. “I didn’t think I’d ever become someone’s trophy, but what’s a girl to do? I’m your prisoner now. Oh, but I guess we’re allies, so I suppose I’m not particularly imprisoned. So? You went through all the effort of waking me back up, what is it you want from me?”

“Hahaha! You’re quick to catch on, Atouy.”

Atou frowned at Erakino’s suggestive comment. She knew whatever the Witch wanted, it was going to be annoying and counterproductive.

“Now that you’ve brought it up, I want you to tell us all about your former master and the empire of Mynoghra that he rules over as the King of Ruin!! Give me the down-low about your people’s abilities! Fill us in on what powers and authority the King of Ruin has! And spill every last detail you know about the Player, Takuto Ira!”

Atou audibly gnashed her teeth. Erakino’s attitude grated on her every nerve.

To start, Atou didn’t doubt for a second that Takuto was still alive. She felt guilt and regret for having hurt him, but she knew he wouldn’t die from such a trivial attack. She had immense trust and absolute confidence in him. But she also understood how critical revealing all the abilities Mynoghra—Takuto—possessed could be.

If she were still on Mynoghra’s side, she would’ve blanched at how fatal of a blow exposing this information would deal to them. Regrettably, she was now affiliated with the Saints of Lenea. She couldn’t resist the overwhelming force pressuring her to disclose that crucial information to her current allies.

“You’ll tell us everything, won’t you? You are our ally, after all.”

For allies, Erakino’s condescending sneer filled Atou with revulsion.

Elemental Ward Rulebook

Game Master

A Game Master (hereafter referred to as GM) mainly leads campaigns in tabletop RPGs and helps session participants play the game smoothly.

Due to their role, they are given various powers, and they are also allowed to make judgment calls on matters not stated in the rules, and sometimes to make special outcome calls that ignore the rules. The GM can exercise their right to make any outcome calls during the game as long as it creates a smooth game session and a better playing experience.

In principle, each player who participates in the game must follow the GM's instructions and is obliged to accept the outcome results. If you wish to protest against the GM's call, you will need a legitimate reason, and please note that unjustified objections may result in penalties for obstructing game progress.

The GM has an obligation to punish players who interfere with the smooth continuation of the game. In these situations, a ruling must be made that satisfies all participants.

There's one very important thing to understand about the GM's authority. That is, the GM is just one participant themselves, and they are only given authority because it is necessary for their role. For this reason, the GM must have the highest common sense and ethical standards to ensure the smooth progress of the game.

Every participant must accept the fact that rights and obligations exist in every game session for every player.

“AND then, get this! King Takuto was all, ‘I’m happy as long as you’re with me, Atou.’ When I heard those wonderful words, my loyalty and devotion to King Takuto skyrocketed. I mean, he’s just the best, most incredible man alive —”

“Say, Atouy...”

The room was held hostage by one girl’s lengthy, loving speech. She moved from topic to topic, never stopping since she got started.

“Oh, speaking of how wonderful he is, there’s this momentous occasion when I decided to learn how to cook—you know, for our future together? I was practicing in secret, but King Takuto found out about it, and he tried my home cooking—”

“Hey, Atouy?” Erakino tried to get her attention again. Figuring that was too soft, she raised her voice and barked, “Will you listen to me already?!”

Erakino had been trying to interject into Atou’s monologue for some time, but all it did was spur her into a more fanatical, passionate speech.

“And then, and then! Despite my food being a failure, King Takuto sweetly told me, ‘Anything tastes good if it’s made by you, Atou—’”

“QUIT YAPPING ALREADY! YOU LOVESTRUCK DUMMY!!”

Just as Atou was reaching the climax of her excitement, Erakino’s anger also piqued in a loud shout that finally put an end to Atou’s unasked-for prattling. It’d be accurate to say that Atou only stopped because she had to. She directed a perturbed look at Erakino for dousing her fun trip down memory lane with her obnoxious shouting.

“...Oh? You’re still here, Witch?”

“Don’t call me Witch! I mean, yeah, I am a Witch, but...I’ve got a name, y’know? Start calling me Erakino like a normal person!” Erakino demanded, throwing a fit and banging her fists on the table. Her demands fell on deaf ears.

Ever since Erakino asked for information on Takuto Ira, Atou had regaled them with flowery tales of her enjoyable time with him. Even Slurping Witch Erakino couldn’t put up with it anymore. Fed up, she lost her cool and shouted at the other Witch. Meanwhile, Atou looked more thrilled than anything by upsetting her. She obviously wasn’t going to make this easy for them.

“So? Why are you interrupting me, *Witch*? I’m just getting to the good part. Honestly, it’s so incredibly rude to stop me when I’m doing you the honor of sharing all the heartwarming and fluffy moments between me and King Takuto. Besides, weren’t you the ones who asked me to tell you *everything* about King Takuto?”

“Well, yeah, we did. But we don’t need to hear you fawning over him... I mean, aren’t you on our side now, Atouy?! How can you still speak all lovey-

dovey about Takuto Ira even after changing sides?!”

“A couple who are still madly in love with each other even after becoming enemies... Star-crossed lovers! Don’t you think that’s even more romantic?” Atou asked with a dreamy smile.

“D-Do you think about anything else?!”

A vein bulged in the corner of Erakino’s forehead. At first glance, she appeared to be laughing along, but her cheeks twitched and the smile died before it reached her eyes. Unable to just sit by and watch her dear friend lose it, Soalina patted her on the back from her seat beside Erakino. Sadly, that did nothing to calm Erakino’s anger.

Her fellow Witch, Atou, gave them a dubious look, then released a long-suffering sigh over only Arlos knows what, and finally used her endlessly flapping lips to speak to them like she was addressing an ignorant fool.

“As much as I hate saying it, I am on your side now. It hurts me even more to say I’m King Takuto’s enemy. But those are the facts. I’m sure I’ll strike him down without any mercy should we confront each other on the battlefield. HOWEVER! I must make it clear once and for all! My feelings for King Takuto are real and true!” Atou declared with her chest puffed out, even though they didn’t ask for confirmation on that. She seemed satisfied once she made her feelings clear, but Erakino couldn’t take it anymore.

“Okay, my anxiety just shot through the roof...” Erakino groaned, clutching her head in her hands and stomping her feet on the ground.

Soalina couldn’t do anything to help her out of this predicament. They didn’t summon this daydreaming, lovestruck girl to listen to her delusions. Their entire conversation had derailed and gotten nowhere.

“All right, I’m done with this annoying Witch here. You, Saint. You seem more capable of intelligent conversation. What’s your question? I’ll answer only in relation to King Takuto.” Taking advantage of Erakino’s sudden departure from the conversation, Atou directed it toward the Saint sitting beside Erakino as if she were an unrelated party.

Soalina’s shoulders trembled at being called upon. She instinctively looked to Fenne for help, but the other Saint was leaning against the wall, watching them with no interest in actually participating in the talks herself.

This was the moment of truth. She would start the Witch on another theatrical monologue if she didn’t word her questions correctly. Soalina was sick of hearing about her love stories. What was important was gleaning strategic information that would influence their future.

“Um,” Soalina began, hesitant. “I would like to know whether the King of Ruin is alive or not. What are your thought—”

“He’s alive.”

Before Soalina could even finish her carefully worded question, the answer came back clear and concise. Atou had shifted out of her cheerful prattling to complete seriousness. Judging by her tone and word choice, Atou fully believed Takuto Ira was alive.

Urged to continue her questioning with a single look from Atou, Soalina pondered her next query. What should she ask next? She was curious about what Atou based her conviction on and tried to find the right words to ask about it.

“...What makes you think that? There’s no way he survived,” Erakino scoffed, recovering slightly from her love-talk-fatigue. “Besides, aren’t you forgetting who literally gouged his heart out?” she sneered, hitting Atou where it hurt.

For Atou to be this sure, she had to know something else they didn’t. They all saw Takuto’s heart get pierced through with a tentacle and then watched as he was burned to ashes. What kind of ability or gimmick did he use to survive that?

“You want to know why I think King Takuto is still alive? If I had to give a reason...I’d have to say it’s because it’s King Takuto we’re talking about. There doesn’t need to be any other reason than that.”

The three girls were met with an answer that answered nothing. Not only that, but Atou completely skipped over every detail that didn’t agree with her. Worst of all, she was obnoxiously confident.

They were back at the same problem they had faced since they summoned Atou. Because the system had forcefully aligned her with them, she couldn’t be lying, which meant she believed every word she told them.

What good was that?

“That ain’t reason enough, Atouuuuu...” Erakino demurred. “And man, I’m still reeling in shock here, y’know? I can’t believe the King of Ruin’s vanguard Witch is no different from a schoolgirl with a crush. I’m surprised you’ve gotten any work done wearing those rose-colored glasses of yours.”

“I have always fulfilled my duties perfectly,” Atou asserted. “I have never once caused King Takuto trouble with my mistakes or selfishness.”

“Reeeeeeally now?” Erakino cocked an eyebrow at her. “I can tell that’s a bald-faced lie right there...”

The three other girls seemed to have some sort of weird misconception about Atou, because this was who she really was. She usually exercised some level of restraint because of her role as Hero, but she was free of that now. Released of her duties as a Hero, her obligations as a subordinate, and her instincts as a being of evil, she was left with nothing more than her status as a girl who was madly in love with Takuto Ira.

Erakino had kept this ace up her sleeve for the opportune moment to play it and win the game, but she'd completely miscalculated her hand.

"Oh, and while we're on the topic," Atou continued in her cheerful voice, "while I'm certain King Takuto is alive, I have absolutely no idea how he survived. I'm not lying nor deceiving you about this—I have no reason to hide anything from my allies. Don't get me wrong, I'm dying to know how he did it myself."

"So are you saying that the King of Ruin somehow resurrected or survived that situation with a method unknown and unrevealed to you?" Soalina asked.

"You got it. I'm surprised too, but he's easily capable of that. Way to go, King Takuto! You have me wowed even as your enemy!" Atou gazed into the distance with an enthralled expression.

Soalina racked her brain for something she could say to bring the daydreaming girl back to reality before she entered another one of her fantasies again. Despite knowing it wasn't very nice, she settled on the crueler option that was most likely to get a reaction out of her.

"U-Um, M-Miss...Atou? If you don't know of a method he could've used to get out of that predicament, then isn't it possible that the King of Ruin actually perished? I understand you might not want to face that possibility, of course..."

"Then, let's look at it from another angle, shall we? Why did you call me here to ask my opinion?"

Atou's sharp observation poured cold water all over the more or less light exchange they had been having up until that point. As she said, they were in a bad enough situation to seek aid from Sludge Atou well before they intended. The fact no one answered her query proved how right Atou was.

"If the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira, really did perish, then you lot would be managing your empire without any hurdles," Atou carried on. "Even if you run into opposition, nothing can stand in the way of your cowardly abilities. And if all went perfectly according to plan, you would have left me forever in dreamland, leaving my body as nothing more than a puppet until the end of time. Am I wrong?"

She wasn't wrong. She had everything down pat.

Everyone felt like retorting: "Is that really something the girl who was blathering on and on about the King of Ruin's wonderfulness since she woke up should say?" But that didn't make her assessment any less accurate. Rather, the undeniable truth there made it clear just how precarious of a situation they were in.

They could feel a bone-chilling darkness that never saw the light of day

slowly encroaching on their territory. The simple feeling of incomprehension was enough to fill them with an eerie sense of dread.

“And besides, you probably don’t know this, so I’ll tell you—when a Commander is defeated in *Eternal Nations*, their empire disappears with them. Simply put, the mere fact that Mynoghra still exists proves that King Takuto is alive. Aaaaaaah!” Atou suddenly squeed. “King Takuto, are you lonely without me? I’m lonely without you, my king!!!”

Everyone aside from Atou, back to pronouncing her love for Takuto, was dumbfounded by this revelation.

What did she just say? they wondered. Even though the three of them had half suspected that was the case, it took time to accept it.

“Oh dear, it looks like none of you knew. Good for you—now you know for sure that the King of Ruin is alive and after you... So, what now, my unwanted allies?” Atou’s heartless gaze fleeced Erakino and the two Saints.

She wasn’t being cute, she was genuinely asking them what they planned to do now that they were up against the man destined to bring ruin to the world.

“King Takuto is powerful, you know?”

That was all Atou had to say to render the three other women speechless.

“So what?!” Erakino shouted hysterically. “We have to resolve this! Even if Takuto Ira is alive, we can’t afford to lose! Don’t you get it?! We can’t lose! We absolutely can’t!!”

Atou took a moment to contemplate Erakino’s argument before cutely humming “Hmm” to herself. She pressed her index finger to her chin and looked up at the stark ceiling.

“You simply can’t win, so why don’t you just surrender already? As a sign of our short-lived friendship, I’ll at least entreat him to spare your lives. King Takuto tends to respect my requests. Since it’ll be a request from me, the one he treasures, he will follow through with it. Do you understand what that means for you—you get to live. You should fall on your knees, rejoicing that you have me on your side.”

Atou never doubted for a second that Takuto would beat them. And she fully believed that he’d come to save her no matter what. That he wouldn’t hold her attacking him against her. Her gaze burned with ultimate trust in Takuto and a conviction that the people she was sided with now would lose.

Her confidence made the others sick.

Disgusted to the max, Erakino lashed out with the most cutting remarks she could think of at the moment.

“Says you. But did you forget you’re here because you betrayed Takuto? Yeah, sure, you may have been Brainwashed by our ability, but will the King of

Ruin really believe a dirty traitor like you~? Maybe he's sick of you? He might've even gotten himself another woman, y'know? Too bad, so sad! Poor, poor, Atou~♪! You got dumped! Rejected! Tossed aside!"

"Not in a million years," Atou laughed. "King Takuto is always kind to me, understands me, and accepts everything about me—the good and the bad. I'm positive everything will go well this time as well. In the end, King Takuto will embrace me and sweetly tell me how worried he was about me. He always thinks of me first and foremost. That's who King Takuto is, and nothing you say will change that!"

"Stop talking about him like he's the world's most understanding boyfriend! Things aren't going to turn out like a middle school girl's fanfiction! Face the facts! Live in reality!"

Erakino kicked the table into the air. Launched by a Witch's powerful legs, the table rocketed toward the ceiling with every intention of smashing through it. Atou's tentacles caught it before it did.

"Oh my gosh! Did you just call him my boyfriend? King Takuto and I haven't started dating yet, silly! O-Of course, u-um, I'm eagerly awaiting the day we start that kind of lovely relationship..." Atou laced and unlaced her fingers, her cheeks flushing red as she returned the table to its original position.

Coincidentally, Erakino's face was also red as she stood huffing across from her—except, for an entirely different reason.

"You sound oh sooooo happy! You're having fun, aren't ya? Your life is all cupcakes and kittens, ain't it? Good for you, Atou! Do you understand that all of our lives are on the line? It's kill or be killed!"

"Of course I'm saying these things with that in mind. Are you sure *you* ladies understand the situation? You don't know anything about the attacks against you right now, do you?"

Atou hit the nail on the head with her assessment. For the Witch who always had her head in the clouds, she made sharp observations about everything that mattered.

As she pointed out, the enemy was calling all the shots right now. Lenea had to acknowledge that they were under attack and always several steps behind their opponent. Everyone in the room understood how bad the situation was without it being said.

"I know I'll be forgiven," Atou said with absolute confidence, "just as I'm certain you will all be killed. There's no reason to save any of you, after all. If you ask me, you are the ones who lack awareness of how precarious of a situation you're in. You're up against *the* King Takuto. You'd better realize how much danger you're in—although it might already be too late."

“Then that’s all the more reason for us to fight back, Witch Atou. Tell me...as far as you know, does Takuto Ira have any tricks up his sleeve—such as skills or subordinates—that could be causing these problems for us?” Fenne asked, speaking for the first time since Atou was summoned. Her expression was hidden behind the veil, but something seemed to have finally spurred her into taking part in the conversation.

Atou gave her a curious look, let a long beat of silence pass, then finally gave them a name with her nose wrinkled in disgust. “There is one person who fits the bill: Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio. He’s a Hero who excels at inciting turmoil and mayhem in enemy nations. It’d be a piece of cake for him to sew confusion with deceptive information. And you should know—he’s the Hero I despise the most.”

“What are the chances of him already being summoned?” Fenne asked, speaking again. As she was the first to get any decent information out of Atou, Erakino and Soalina watched the exchange with bated breath.

“I can’t say for sure one way or another. At the very least, I have no memory of him being summoned while I was around. He can be summoned at Mynoghra’s current facility and research level, so I wouldn’t completely dismiss the notion... However, I strongly doubt he’s in play right now.”

Atou made this claim based on the same instincts that told her Takuto was alive. The others were satisfied to at least know their opponent might have a Hero capable of causing their current problems because it brought them one step closer to the truth.

“Is there anything else we should be aware of?” Fenne asked.

“There are a few crucial things I’ll tell you about shortly... I’m quite worried, since you all seem to be foolishly optimistic,” Atou said, then paused to think about it for a moment.

Atou couldn’t help viewing the girls in front of her as lambs waiting for the slaughter. When they first woke her up and consulted her, she shared that she and Takuto had abilities from the simulation game *Eternal Nations*. However, they were completely in the dark about the myriad of elements that extended beyond the basic game features.

For example, they didn’t know about the quickly developed military power Mynoghra had obtained through the gold coins dropped into their lap by *Brave Questers*’ Demon Lord Army. They had no idea about Mynoghra’s alliance with Phon’kaven and their treaty to provide firearms. They had overlooked the existence of the twin sisters who indiscriminately wreaked havoc and utter insanity on all within sight when their abilities piqued with the full moon...

Even if Atou’s dearly beloved Takuto had died during their attack, this

peculiar trio's carelessness had them leave behind live coals that would eventually erupt into a full-blown inferno that came after them either way. They seemed to falsely believe they had thoroughly planned everything out, but everything about their plans was too off the cuff to truly succeed. They'd only made it this far because they had the unholy game ability to force situations to play out how they wanted.

"What we first need to get into all of our heads, mine included, is that King Takuto is attacking us using unknown means," Atou said. "Please be prepared to doubt everything and handle whatever is thrown at you. I'll accompany you from now on, so be sure to never leave my side. A battle could happen any second—even as we speak."

"...True. I agree we need to be on high alert," Fenne said. "Tell me this, Sludge Atou. Supposing your theory about Takuto Ira being alive is true, do you know why he's sneaking around rather than facing us directly?"

"Easy—there's a 99 percent chance he's doing it for me!"

Everyone else exhaled an exasperated sigh. That was the end of their useful information gathering. Any further questioning in this vein would end in another earful of her fawning over her beloved. Or perhaps it was just that even Atou didn't know for sure what Takuto had come to do.

"Looks like Atou's the damsel in distress waiting for her prince to rescue her," Erakino quipped. "Can't you be a bit more like a useless damsel and be too scared to talk back to us?"

"That's not popular in this modern era," Atou corrected her.

"It's not the modern era! This is a fantasy world!!"

Finally running out of half-decent retorts, Erakino ruminated over the information Atou had provided while randomly replying when appropriate.

Atou's bias always colored her comments, but she might be right that Takuto Ira was attacking them from the shadows in search of her. It was frustrating to think that the King of Ruin was still alive after their thorough surprise attack, but they needed to accept the facts even if they didn't like them.

Takuto Ira was alive. And he was coming after them as they spoke. They needed to act with that assumption.

The King of Ruin was using some method to suppress their ultimate ability. There was no other way they'd have this hard of a time countering the attack when they had the Arbiter's Authority on their side.

As Erakino and the two Saints fell into contemplative silence, the room filled with an eerie stillness. Atou was the one who broke what felt like endless quiet by raising her index finger. All eyes turned to her.

"As far as I know, King Takuto is a normal human being with no physical

abilities or skills beyond his authority as a Commander,” Atou said. “However, the events plaguing Lenea directly contrast what I know.”

Atou went in-depth explaining the dangers Takuto Ira posed as a person, and she did it for none other than her current allies’ sake.

Takuto was...without a doubt, a normal person. Aside from having the powers of an *Eternal Nations*’ Commander, he was nothing more than your run-of-the-mill weakling human that died young of a serious disease.

But he was capable of doing the impossible—that was far from what you could call “normal.”

Takuto Ira was...abnormal. An anomaly.

“Tread carefully. King Takuto is far beyond our comprehension, and he’s taking action knowing what we don’t. Everything he’s doing is to take back his enemy—me!” After clarifying what she wanted to say the most, Atou flopped back into the sofa and got extra comfortable. She seemed awfully content, as if she’d said everything there was to say.

“Ugh...” Erakino groaned. “This whole conversation ended with us learning nothing. Or rather, learning that there was nothing to learn from you? You’re utterly useless, Atou...”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’m very useful. After all, I can give you the one piece of advice that will keep you alive—surrender before it’s too late. That’s the only way to survive,” Atou declared, her eyes fluttering shut with satisfaction.

Not ready to end the conversation there, Erakino bombarded her with questions, but they all ended with Atou regaling them with passionate tales about Takuto, wasting everyone’s time but hers.

Chapter 4: A Fish in Troubled Waters

AS a recently founded nation located in the southernmost region of the Lawful Continent, the Divine Nation of Lenea was connected geographically to the Dark Continent. Easy access to trade with the nations of the Dark Continent came hand in hand with a commensurate number of territorial disputes with those same nations. Unexpected conflict was inevitable, given the circumstances.

“You aren’t worth my time! Bring someone with more authority to discuss this! I can’t get anywhere with the likes of you!”

“I-I’m trying my best here...”

The High Paladin in charge of a platoon was at his wits’ end, trying to handle the overly self-assertive Phon’kaven representative harrumphing in front of him.

When did this nightmare begin?

The High Paladin vividly remembered how, not long after the turbulent days following the establishment of their new divine nation, a deluge of petitions came flooding in from the various settlements under their jurisdiction. The most urgent petitions concerned unusual monsters lurking around the territories connected to the Dark Continent.

The first petition to make mention of the monsters came from a peddler traveling between the two continents. Upon discovering the strange monsters near the gateway to the Dark Continent, the peddler promptly petitioned the Paladins to subjugate the threat. The High Paladin recalled his heart-stopping panic when he learned the monsters were discovered not far from a small settlement. While the information lacked verification, it suggested that the vicious creatures were a lethal threat to Lenea’s citizens.

Monsters are posing a threat to our people as we speak, yet here I am, wasting my time on pointless politics! he lamented.

While the upper echelons were too busy managing the chaos accompanying the founding of their new nation, this High Paladin ran around recruiting any Paladin or soldier with a moment to spare to form a subjugation force. When they embarked on their mission, they found a sight straight out of a nightmare.

Prowling their border were abominations that tainted the mind just by looking at them. These gargantuan incarnations of evil shared few traits with any

known creature. Looking like something that had sprung up from the dark depths of hell as described in the Holy Book, the abominations posed a greater threat than anticipated, requiring the Paladins to be prepared to die while subjugating them.

It was during this precarious moment that they coincidentally encountered this contingent from Phon'kaven, who claimed to have come to exterminate the monsters and restore peace to the borderlands just like the Paladins.

“LIKE! I! SAID!” the Phon'kaven representative shouted, dragging out his vowels. “If we’re after the same thing, we should work together to quell the threat! What makes that so difficult for you to understand?! You’ll make me mad if you don’t start cooperating already!”

“As far as I see it, you’re already mad...” the High Paladin quipped.

“Well, duh! I feel like I’m talking to a wall!”

We’re up against a wall ourselves, thought every single Lenea Paladin. They had formed this platoon and came to the border to protect their citizens. From the start, their goal was to subjugate the unknown monsters, and all the preparations they had barely managed existed only for that end. They weren’t prepared for a political situation and wanted to avoid making any calls that might come back to bite them later.

The Divine Nation of Lenea was a religious country that had branched off from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. Their nation was founded on the rules and laws outlined in their Holy Books, so they needed to exercise the utmost caution when interacting with Phon'kaven, which had a unique religion centered around ancestral spirit worship.

“A-N-Y-W-A-Y-S! I don’t care if it’s in an unofficial capacity, just get me someone who can make things happen! If we let this go on, both your country and mine will suffer. Oh, actually, I’d like to become friends with a Saint if I can, so be a pal and call for a Saint!”

Disgruntled voices started to rise from the High Paladin’s men, and he signaled them to quiet down behind him. He didn’t know what the Phon'kaven representative was thinking, but it was the height of arrogance to request one of God’s blessed Saints. The subjugation platoon’s anger was warranted, but doing anything about it was foolish. They needed to suppress their grievances and ire.

Phon'kaven was under the same pressure to subdue the threat to their people, which warranted some level of understanding and lenience.

Vividly recalling the bat-winged serpentine monster that he’d just fought, the platoon captain took a deep breath to regain his composure. No High Paladin was so incompetent that he’d cause unnecessary conflict and forget his holy mission. It also helped that he had an oddly favorable impression of the young

boy who didn't mince words...

"Our great Saints can't just show up whenever they are called upon," the High Paladin explained. "It's a critical time for our nation, so it will be difficult for them to answer our summons. I'm sure you understand this as well, but we are running out of time. I believe we need to resolve this problem with the people present."

"*Hm-mm...* True that! All right, then! You seem high up enough to make things happen. Let's decide upon a treaty between Qualia and Phon'kaven right here and now!" the boy declared with a big smile.

"I-I don't have that level of authority! No one would stand for such an arbitrary decision! Also, we aren't from Qualia—we're Paladins from the Divine Nation of Lenea!"

"Is that so? It doesn't matter though, since I've got all the authority we need," the boy claimed. "I mean, this whole thing is a big fat pain, so why don't we just go ahead and formally establish diplomatic relations now? Shouldn't be a problem if we keep it between us, don't you think?"

"No, it *will* be a huge problem! Even if you're okay with it, Lenea won't be!" the High Paladin thundered, attempting to stop the boy before things got completely out of control.

"Stingy, aren't you?"

The High Paladin assumed the boy was talking nonsense the way children do, but it was too dangerous to ignore him. Did he have the authority to make such a crucial decision as he claimed? In the unlikely event that this was the overreaching act of some politician's spoiled son, the Paladins' reputation would be tarnished. The High Paladin had entertained thoughts on how to protect himself if things did go south, which made him especially glad he didn't have the authority or grounds to make the final decision.

Of course, even if they put their diplomatic response on hold, it did nothing to address the most pressing problem at hand—the unholy monsters plaguing the borderlands.

"I really don't think it will be a problem, though..." the boy said. "But let's be honest, we're all pretty screwed right now, aren't we? These monsters are stronger than they look. We've managed to defeat a few on our own, but from the looks of things, there's more of them than us. Qualia's villagers will be in grave danger if any stragglers make their way there..."

"We're Lenea, not Qualia, thank you," the High Paladin corrected him. "But you make a fair point. *Hm...*"

The Paladins in the platoon looked at the men serving under them as they listened to the boy—to Pepe's side of the argument. The High Paladins and

Mesial Paladins among their ranks were holding their own, but the Under Paladins and normal soldiers were running out of steam. Fortunately, no one had died or sustained critical injuries yet, but it was only a matter of time.

While the territory bordering the Dark Continent was geographically confined to a narrow space, it was too vast to cover with their current forces. They'd significantly increase their odds of success if they joined forces with Phon'kaven.

Phon'kaven was in possession of what could only be described as unconventional weapons. They wielded what seemed to be a staff that shot tiny, fast-flying stones from the tip with a loud bang. Was it some sort of magical artifice? If it was one, it seemed odd their fifty-strong troop was fully equipped with one or more of the devices each. Judging from the sheer proficiency and power behind the weapons, the High Paladin assumed they were some sort of elite unit or an experimental one. Then again, he couldn't make heads or tails of why such a military unit would be commanded by an overly familiar little boy like Pepe.

As the captain of the subjugation force, the High Paladin was torn over how to proceed. It would be easy to drive off the other country's forces by saying they couldn't work together. However, as a new nation with inexperienced leadership, Lenea was unstable in more ways than one.

For all their protection from the Saints and Arlos, not every problem was instantly solved for them. Their relationship with Qualia was strained, and they needed to be wary of how things would play out with El-Nah too. Adding to those problems was the confusing way instructions were being handed down from the higher-ups amid the turmoil accompanying the nation's founding. Orders written in the name of the Saints and orders written in the name of the Paladin Commander tended to arrive separately, and the contents often countered each other.

Even this subjugation force had taken action of their own accord and set out for the borderlands, prepared to be punished for it later. That, however, didn't mean they should go about adding to their crimes, nor did their country have the freedom or resources to stir up trouble with other nations. Things were different now that they were no longer a part of a world power—they couldn't openly look down on the Dark Continent nations and their inferior cultures anymore.

"How about we just work together to exterminate the monsters for now? I won't tell nobody, so no one will know..." the boy persuaded in a mischievous whisper.

The Paladins and soldiers got caught up in the moment as they offered their

opinions in equally secretive whispers.

“Captain...we should cooperate with them, even just temporarily. We should prioritize limiting potential victims by eliminating the monsters as soon as possible.”

“I disagree! Paladins must set an example for the people. We can’t go around abusing our authority, even during a crisis! I strongly believe we need to receive permission from a Priest with the authority to make national defense decisions.”

“All of that can wait until we look into those strange weapons they use! We can’t turn a blind eye to them wielding such power. I suggest an immediate investigation into where those weapons come from!”

Each person had wildly different opinions and approaches. For every Paladin among them, there seemed to be an entirely different suggestion. Due to the hasty formation of the platoon, it lacked leadership. Paladins are all elite warriors in their own right, but they often conduct solo missions, so they aren’t very useful in situations where sudden political decisions are necessary. The same applied to the High Paladin serving as the subjugation platoon’s captain.

He didn’t know if he was dealing with a politician’s child brandishing an army without permission. However, the perfectly ordered Phon’kaven troops staying on high alert behind Pepe as they waited for marching orders seemed like a far cry from the uncivilized reputation the Lawful Continent labeled them with. An outsider looking at both forces standing there would have a hard time telling who the truly uncivilized nation was. The High Paladin knew it was nothing to be proud of, but the high-pressure situation exposed his inherent prejudice toward his southern neighbors.

Blast it all! Why did these unholy monsters have to show up now? We could’ve easily handled them a month from now. Is it possible to officially turn down Phon’kaven’s offer to fight together with the notion that we will help each other out if something goes terribly wrong later? I hate to divide our forces, but we should be able to protect our people if we focus solely on defending the areas around the settlements and patrol the outskirts.

Still, Phon’kaven’s weapons pose a problem, he realized. On what principle does it work? Did their magical engineering produce those weapons? I’ve never heard of such a technology used in Qualia or El-Nah. A Paladin could take one on, but the same couldn’t be said of a normal foot soldier. It needs to be urgently investigated.

I need an equivocal response to somehow get us past this point and on to exterminating the monsters. Is there nothing I can say to make that happen?

The High Paladin was looking for a way to postpone the issue without

saying yea or nay to working together. He wanted to quickly pick a course of action and concentrate his energy on subjugating the monster threat. Unfortunately, he took too long to come to a decision.

“Enemy incoming!!”

“Already?!”

That warning cry came from a Phon’kaven soldier keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. His clear, resounding voice cut through the pensive silence, forcing everyone to switch to battle mode. One of the outlandish monsters they had seen prowling the borderlands came bounding toward them from the same direction the soldier had cried out to alert them.

“Saints have mercy! Draw your swords!” the High Paladin Captain ordered his platoon. “Mesial and High Paladins, take forward formation! Show them Arlos’s might!”

“Wowwie-wow! Battle positions, people!” Pepe bellowed in his boyish voice. “Be sure not to shoot anybody from Qualia!”

“We aren’t from Qualia!” the High Paladin barked. “We’re from the Divine Nation of Lenea!”

With the monster’s spine-tingling roar as their signal, the Paladins from a holy nation and the warriors from a multiracial empire took aim at their mutual enemy. The boundary between the Lawful and Dark Continents was blurred due to the TRPG monsters the Game Master had created and summoned to suppress the Dark Continent. Those monsters had strayed from his surveillance and control, running equally amok in his own territory.

Chaos bred greater chaos, and the urgency of the situation led both sides to gradually take on a united front against the monsters. Paladins exist solely to fulfill their sworn mission—to be the people’s sword and shield. Their true nature was that of a warrior hero. And so, they couldn’t object to working together in this dire moment.

No one could have guessed that Phon’kaven’s army would take advantage of the confusion to march right into Qualia’s former Southern Province—Lenea’s territory—and choose not to leave.



“BWAAAGH!!”

In the wee hours of the night, the pained cry of an innocent and reckless young boy rang throughout ground camp for Phon’kaven’s Monster Subjugation Force.

“Why did ya move the army into action without asking, you foolish boy?! Are you so desperate to see our country ruined?! That’s the only reasonable explanation under the circumstances!!”

Kneeling in the center of the tent with a large bump on the top of his head was Phon’kaven’s Commander—Staff Holder Pepe. Looming directly above him was his fellow Staff Holder and mentor, Tonukapoli. The cow-headed old woman was giving the boy, who always did the unthinkable, a piece of her mind and reproaching him for his actions yet again. She was even stricter with him than usual because of the gravity and peril accompanying his most recent exploit.

“What can I say? I’ve been wanting to expand our territory. The little devil on my shoulder was telling me now’s the time to strike!”

His blunt explanation left Tonukapoli speechless. That was not a good reason to advance a nation’s army into another nation’s domain. Things weren’t as simple as a child wanting a new toy and taking one from the kid sitting in the sand with them. Tonukapoli cradled her head in her hand and did her best to try to understand the situation he’d just slammed Phon’kaven into.

Expanding our territory...is definitely of great importance to us! Phon’kaven has less land under its control now that we’ve given Dragontan to Mynoghra. The fertile lands on the Lawful Continent are especially appealing now that we have our defenses covered with the weapons Mynoghra provided. But that’s not a good enough reason to march into their territory right now.

Phon’kaven didn’t have much need to deliberately advance their armies into the Lawful Continent right now. As far as expanding their territory, the Dark Continent had vast untouched land. Of course, the terrain was barren and unsuitable for agriculture, so it was far from ideal. However, they could fully fertilize and cultivate that barren land if they used the Earth Mana and Earth Military Magic they were developing with Mynoghra.

They didn’t need to go playing with matches where they knew they would start a fire. The strange new monsters were concerning. Any phenomenon reminiscent of the Great Barbarian Invasion that once plagued Phon’kaven was an extremely urgent event requiring immediate investigation. But again, that was no reason for them to draw undue attention to themselves right outside the holy men’s backyard. No, they had actually brought their army right into their neighbor’s yard—there was no escaping the fallout now.

Pepe was a fool. He was foolish, careless, disrespectful of his elders, and always doing crazy things. But he wasn’t *stupid*.

On the contrary, he always made the best choices at key moments when leading Phon’kaven. Everything he seemed to do on the spur of the moment had

greater significance to their nation than it first appeared. If that had been the case for all his decisions up until now, then it seemed likely that he had more in mind this time too. Considering how quickly he decided to move their army in, he clearly had a plan.

Hoping to figure out what that plan was, Tonukapoli prodded the boy for information. “Pepe, what are you thinking? Stop beating around the bush with me, boy. Tell me what you have in mind already, will ya?”

“Hm-mm...”

Pepe was a natural airhead with a rare talent for politics and governance. There was no way he was unaware of the dangers of invading another country. He should know it intuitively... As someone blessed with exceptional intuition, he had to have had a justifiable reason to push through this extremely dangerous course of action.

Seeing how Pepe was biding his time with *hms* and *hums*, either he didn’t want to tell Tonukapoli or...he couldn’t. So Tonukapoli used her usual method to grease the boy’s wheels and get him talking.

“Mynoghra has its own problems right now. You don’t want to make things worse for them by making a wrong decision here, do you? I know you don’t want to upset your good friend and make him hate you, either. Have you given any thought to that?” she pressed.

“Oh, no worries. I asked my pal Takuto for advice and got his stamp of approval to do this,” Pepe revealed with a boyish smile.

Tonukapoli cradled her head with both hands this time. He’d just saddled her with a million worries.

Phon’kaven decided how to run and manage their country through a council of Staff Holders. Most everyone knew that the elderly Staff Holders were essentially retired and had entrusted foreign negotiations and the nation’s general direction to Pepe, their successor. Even so, there were more than a few problems with him just randomly deciding to take the nation in a drastically different direction.

If that wasn’t a big enough problem on its own, his advisor was the legendary King of Ruin. Tonukapoli wanted to berate him to at least report back to the Staff Holders about such crucial developments.

Besides that, when did he get the chance to consult with King Takuto?! The king hasn’t been seen since the assassination attempt. His retainers refuse to tell us anything, leaving Phon’kaven in the dark about his whereabouts. Pepe’s babysitters haven’t said anything about seeing him meet with the king either. What the Spirits is going on here?

Doubts boiled over inside Tonukapoli. She tried to organize her thoughts

first, before further questioning Pepe. As far as she knew, someone tried to assassinate King Takuto during the Dragontan Cession Completion Ceremony jointly hosted by Mynoghra and Phon'kaven. After that, Tonukapoli and Pepe were privately contacted by the Elfuur Sisters and informed their king was safe, but he had disappeared along with his closest aide, Atou, ever since.

Almost immediately after those events, the Southern Province of the Holy Kingdom of Qualia seceded under the initiative of two Saints. Those Saints declared the founding of a new country called the Divine Nation of Lenea. And then monsters, unlike anything else, appeared on the borders between the Lawful and Dark Continents, almost as if to divide them.

Considering the response from Mynoghra, they haven't told Phon'kaven the whole story yet. I thought that the assassination attempt on King Takuto, the political change in Qualia, and the monster outbreak were separate events, but maybe they're connected?

Tonukapoli finally reached the heart of the matter. She'd believed that several disconnected problems were occurring at once, when in reality, they were connected. The scattered bits of information converged into a coherent image, like puzzle pieces finally coming together. Tonukapoli's heart sped up, physiologically responding to the dangers her mind was becoming aware of.

She had come to a terrible conclusion.

The Divine Nation of Lenea was an emergent nation that had branched off from the Holy Kingdom of Qualia. Tonukapoli didn't know what rules or principles this new country advocated, but it was obvious they believed in the Holy God Arlos. Anyone would think twice before targeting a country that worshipped the same god as the Holy Kingdom.

Qualia tended to treat the nations and peoples of the Dark Continent as inferior. Their bigoted and prideful clergy would never stand for another nation—especially one that didn't worship Arlos—taking their god-given land. They wouldn't sit still even if an offshoot of their own nation did the deed.

And it goes without saying that if Qualia were to move, their ally—the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals—would too. Attempting to expand into the Lawful Continent was the same as purposefully waking a sleeping giant.

Tonukapoli realized as much since she'd learned of what Pepe had done. That was why she lost her cool and went off at the boy leader worse than usual. It didn't matter if they had a powerful ally in Mynoghra—they were as good as dead if they made enemies of both Qualia and El-Nah...

There was only one way to overturn that premise. Say, a scenario where chaos was caused in the holy countries so severe that they couldn't even afford to wage a retaliatory war. If such a scenario was playing out, then Phon'kaven

would lose out if they didn't make their move here. At the very least, they would sustain an untold negative impact if they were too slow to act.

That's it! King Takuto's not after the fertile northern lands, but the borderlands connecting the Lawful and Dark Continents! Is he trying to seal off the north?!

Tonukapoli was suddenly reminded of the dread she'd felt the first time she met the King of Ruin and exchanged words with him. She remembered the indescribable fear that gripped her very soul and the reclusive insanity burning deep within the king's eyes.

It might've slipped her mind since becoming allies, but they were dealing with someone destined to bring the end—the apocalypse-bringer.

How would the King of Ruin rule against his adversaries?

It didn't take much thought to come to an answer.

He was not the kind of being to let his adversaries roam free.

He would not stop until every fiber of his adversaries' very being was reduced to ash.

That was the impression Tonukapoli got from the being known as Takuto Ira.

"Tell me. How much do ya know?" Tonukapoli asked in a quiet, unwavering voice. Her eyes stared straight into Pepe's, putting on an unspoken pressure that dodging the question was out. She needed to know the big picture Pepe had—no, that the King of Ruin had planned out.

"Whoa there. Takuto and I might be buddies, but that doesn't mean I know everything... A hedge between makes friendship green, as they say!"

"What *do* you know then?"

With that bit of pressure from Tonukapoli, Pepe finally raised his palms in defeat. Then he screwed up his face in a rare show of a complicated expression before saying, "What's it called? The Divine Nation of Lenea? Anyway, my bet is that country won't be around for much longer! Literally!"

The way Pepe said it, like it was already a done deal, made Tonukapoli dizzy with the realization that things were graver than she'd imagined.

The Lawful Continent where Qualia and El-Nah existed. And the Dark Continent, where Mynoghra, Phon'kaven, and several small and medium-sized nations existed. Right next to the place where these two continents connected, in the center of the two, the seeds of destruction were smoldering under the surface, ready to explode and engulf everything in their wake.

Elemental Ward Rulebook

Monster (Hostile NPC)

A wide variety of hostile NPCs are available to use in Elemental Ward.

These NPCs range from monster-types such as Goblins, Kobolds, and Orcs to human-types such as Bandits and Knights. There are also powerful creatures, such as Dragons and Undead Kings, to paint the story you want to create.

The scenario creator can make these entities appear in the game, but they must adhere to the world settings and lore.

For example, monsters with low intelligence, such as Goblins, don't speak fluently and aren't friendly toward humans. Undead Kings are generally found deep inside tombs and ruins, and rarely come down to human settlements. Negotiations are possible with them, but adequate compensation is required. Naturally, Dragons won't attack players by the dozens. NPCs will conform to the lore and settings listed in the rulebook.

Complying with these settings and lore is essential for the best gameplay experience. If any depictions in the game scenario run contrary to this, a participant can immediately point it out and request a change from the GM.

Chapter 5: Phantom

FJORD Vysterk, Commander of the Divine Nation of Lenea's Order of Paladins, a man hailed by the masses as Fjord the Stalwart, listened to his subordinates' report with a haggard expression that belied his former imposing energy and drive. He was the High Paladin given the most esteem and authority throughout Qualia's Southern Province.

"Next is the 4th zone of the 3rd Parish serving the residential district for laymen. We have lost contact with Under Paladin Wieck and his cadet, Franco."

Fjord listened to this report in the Order's headquarters, where they had set up a temporary command post in the main hall to handle the Paladin Murder Cases. Documents containing a plethora of information were pinned to the walls, and a swarm of Paladins and clergymen ran about scrutinizing that information.

Lenea's Order of Paladins, and the soldiers and clergy serving under them throughout the former Southern Province, were fighting the battle of their lives to preserve their reputation. Fighting on the front lines of the information war was Fjord—a man who forewent sleep with the hope of not letting a single detail slip him by. When he learned that tragedy struck again despite his every effort to prevent it, he bit down so hard on his bottom lip, it bled.

"I...see," he said grimly, the taste of blood spreading across his tongue. "Have their autopsies come back yet? What did Cleric Cayman have to say?"

"They have. The bodies were consumed by flame like the others. However, there was less desecration and mutilation done to their faces compared to prior cases. According to Cleric Cayman, killing seems to have been the sole objective this time."

The Paladin Murder Case didn't stop with one or two Paladins. The culprit was still out there, using their unholy methods to slay God's holy warriors, keeping to the shadows as they went. Contrary to Fjord's lofty declaration to the Saints about solving the case, needless additional losses besieged the Paladins.

"If killing is the culprit's objective, then...perhaps they are trying to reduce our numbers? Still, I can't believe we're suffering nothing but losses even after increasing the number of men on patrol together... Were there any witnesses this time?" Fjord asked.

The young Paladin giving the report gave his head a solemn shake.

“However,” he began, dropping his gaze to the documents in his hand before continuing, “when questioned, the neighbors said they heard men arguing in the middle of the night. I believe this might be around the time the murders occurred.”

They had a relatively easy time determining the time of death for every incident. And yet, they couldn’t find a single eyewitness. Perhaps that only spoke to the culprit’s skill, but even so, it was beyond eerie that they never left a trace.

“Did anyone notice anything strange going on this time? Even just a glimpse of someone unusual or something out of the ordinary?” Fjord asked.

“Unfortunately, no. Worse yet, rumors are spreading through the masses that there’s a phantom out hunting Paladins. There’s also less information available about this incident because the Cleric in charge of that district’s parish has enforced a strict curfew.”

Over a dozen people, including several Paladins renowned for their skill and achievements, had fallen victim to the Paladin Slayer. Some sort of warning or evidence should’ve been out there, somewhere, especially with some of the Paladins being killed in broad daylight. And yet there was nothing to go off of before or after the murders took place. Even the esteemed Order of Paladins would be hard-pressed to catch the elusive culprit under these circumstances. It was almost as if they were fighting their own shadow at times, so it was no wonder everyone had taken to calling their foe—

“The Phantom of Lenea... Oh, how our glorious Order has fallen,” Fjord muttered, letting out a sharp exhale to release the tension bearing down on him.

He was really starting to feel his age these days. He felt it more mentally than he did physically. Another weary sigh escaped him. He couldn’t seek help from the Saints so soon after haughtily declaring the Order would handle it.

Fjord was someone the people could look up to as the model upright and devout man of the cloth. However, his body wasn’t made of stone, nor was his heart cast in steel. He was a bona fide human who cried, laughed, angered, and rejoiced like everyone else. That was why he was just as susceptible to only being able to wait and watch as the situation worsened, his shame becoming harder to wash away.

Normally, keeping one’s weaknesses in check was a quality required of a Paladin. With that said, there’s no human who doesn’t make mistakes. Being perfectly perfect in every way is a trait belonging to the gods.

Fjord Vysterk was just a normal human with a stronger will than most.

“Commander Fjord...”

The young Paladin giving the report grew pensive as he saw Fjord’s

anguished expression. The members of the Order were just as human as their commander. They failed to raise objections despite knowing Fjord was making the wrong call. No one wanted to suggest otherwise out of a strong sense of camaraderie that pushed them to support their highly respected commander. And then there was the sense of self-preservation—a fear of being forced to take the blame for wrong advice. And just like that, they found themselves slipping to this low because they did nothing more than exchange silent looks.

There was a system of confessing and repenting in place to help put people back on the right track and avoid problems that stemmed from human error. Unfortunately, no idle and frivolous clergy were around to listen to their confessions. Nor were there any clergy left to take bribes under the table, guaranteeing an untarnished reputation.

Those clergy had become corpses left in the Order's wake.

The dead say nothing. As such, no one was left to pass on their true role within the government.

In the end, the Order of Paladins' investigation made no progress. Like an endless treasure hunt where the treasure's exact location is unknown, they continued to dig holes, only to come up empty. They repeated this meaningless process dozens of times, wasting precious time with nothing to show for it.

They did this knowing there was a very real enemy out there. The answers they sought were veiled in darkness, tempting them just out of sight. All the while, their comrades were being burned alive one after the other.

"...It all comes back to fire..." Fjord muttered to himself after ruminating over the new information with his tired brain.

Every Paladin had been killed with fire. Of course, this was made known to the entire Order, and they had prepared holy defenses against demonic fire. Increasing the number of men on patrol together was meant to increase their chance of survival and have someone who could flee and inform the others should something happen to their unit.

In this most recent case, Cadet Franco should have run to get help while Under Paladin Wieck confronted the phantom. Every member of the Order had agreed to this setup and acknowledged gathering information was their top priority. The reality was that all their strategies and countermeasures against the phantom ended in vain.

"We can't identify the phantom nor escape it. It unilaterally burns us to death without being noticed or leaving any traces behind. How?"

Fjord felt like he was missing something. He couldn't shake the feeling of having overlooked something crucial. He just didn't know what that something was.

Erakino had secretly informed him of the terrifying truth that the King of Ruin was still alive. He'd also learned that this series of events was very likely the work of Takuto Ira. That was why Fjord felt frustrated that the strange sense of incongruity nagging at the back of his mind was amplifying by the day.

He couldn't escape the thought that he'd made a fatal mistake along the way. But he had no way of knowing what that mistake was. Evil was knocking at his door, and yet he had no way of seeing it or making sure it didn't come in. That fact, coupled with his regret over being unable to avenge his fallen comrades, ate away at him like moths devouring cloth.

"I'm going to take a brief break. I'll be spending the time in prayer, so please keep people away." Hoping for a change of pace, Fjord stood from his chair while rubbing his eyes.

He wanted to organize his thoughts. He hoped praying would alleviate the unease plaguing his mind like a hammering headache. He thought he might finally learn why he had this odd sense that he wasn't himself. That fleeting hope had burned within him for only Arlos knew how long.

"Of course, Great Commander Fjord. We can handle command during your short reprieve..."

"Thank you. Please do," Commander Fjord responded tiredly to the young Paladin's awkward attempt at encouragement and left the command post.



THE heavy door shut with a thud. Left with the image of his commander's once-broad-looking back seeming smaller and more hunched than before, the young Paladin shook his head to rid it of such thoughts.

"Okay!" he said loudly to perk everyone in the command post up. "Let's go back through the deceased's last day. We might have overlooked something. We should order the soldiers to question the residents one more time too. I think we might get more of a response if we let the masses know a bit more about the situation. What do the rest of you think?"

They had lost two more brothers-in-arms, so they needed to work around the clock to fill in the gaps. They also needed to come up with new ideas. They couldn't leave every little detail to Fjord—they should at least try to come up with some good suggestions while they could.

The young Paladin had squeezed out the last vestiges of his energy to draw everyone in to discuss those things, but the wind went right out of his sails when the heavy hall doors flung open.

“Pardon me!”

In marched a normal soldier belonging to the Order. Judging from his attire, he was a messenger. He was gasping for air and seemed to be in a rush, drawing all eyes to him.

He gulped when he realized the much higher-ranked Paladins were staring at him. “Um, an emissary...has arrived from the Holy Capital of Qualiane,” he choked out.

It was the Paladins’ turn to be taken aback. They all knew this was coming, and yet they had hoped for more time.

An emissary from the Holy Capital of Qualiane was an emissary from Qualia.

The emissary’s purpose was obviously to question them about the secession of the Southern Province and the founding of the Divine Nation of Lenea. Dealing with Qualia while the phantom was running loose within Lenea was bad enough, but things would only get worse if Qualia learned what was happening and decided to interfere in their domestic affairs. All that awaited the traitorous Order of Paladins and the Divine Nation of Lenea was a tragic end if that happened.

The Order needed to do whatever it took to conceal Lenea’s problems from Qualia. They had to figure one thing out before they could do that.

“So, who did they send?”

The Paladins experienced their second shock of the day. Commander Fjord had returned to the main hall.

“Commander Fjord!” the young Paladin cried. “Didn’t you just return to your quarters? Are you done resting already?”

“Yes. Doesn’t look like now’s the time for me to rest. I’m sorry I don’t know your name, young man, but could you tell me who the emissary is?”

The Paladins couldn’t deny they felt relieved to see him. They were neither experienced nor brave enough to make crucial decisions without their commander. They didn’t have the authority to make such a decision either, so they would’ve had to fetch Fjord anyway. His timely return was a godsend in that regard. The Paladins decided to silently watch where things went.

They could tell how much Qualia intended to interfere in their affairs by the person they sent to represent them. Their connections could help out depending on the emissary. They hoped it was someone who took bribes or liked to do things under the table.

However, contrary to the Paladins’ mounting intrigue, the messenger seemed hesitant to say more.

“What’s wrong?” Fjord prompted. “We need to prepare for who’s coming.

I know you're flustered by the suddenness of it all, but please take a breath and tell us."

"...cribe...aint..."

"Hm, sorry, but could you repeat that in a louder voice?" Fjord asked, leaning forward to hear him better.

The messenger had responded in a barely audible whisper. The Paladins might boast enhanced physical capabilities, but even their super hearing couldn't pick up the man's wisp of a voice, especially with how fatigued they were.

The trembling messenger seemed to finally steel his resolve, took a deep breath, and shouted so loud everyone in the main hall could make out what he said. "I-It's the Scribe Saint Lytrain Nerim Quartz!!"

The Paladins and soldiers broke their silence to groan amongst themselves. The messenger had just mentioned the worst possible person they could imagine. A visit from a Qualia Saint under these circumstances guaranteed they were about to be dragged under the surface when they were already struggling to stay afloat.

They needed to take an even more fastidious approach to governance now. One wrong step, and their country was doomed. That was the type of person Qualia sent as its emissary.

As the Paladins scrunched up their faces in bitter agony over the latest problem to plague their country, the most renowned Paladin in the Southern Province—Fjord Vysterk—wrinkled his brows in much the same way...except for the quiet sneer he concealed from the rest.



Fjord the Stalwart

Combat Unit

Strength: 8 Move: 1

<<Holy>>

<<Holy Sword Artes>>

<<Faith>>

NO
IMAGE

Description

~High Paladin Fjord the Stalwart. The brilliance of his Holy Sword will annihilate all evildoers.~

High Paladin Fjord is the commander of the Divine Nation of Lenea's Order of Paladins. Praised by the people as Fjord the Stalwart, he spearheaded the resolution of the "Eastern Province Heretic Incident" and the "Destruction of the Illegal Drug Syndicate" in the past, making him known throughout the Lawful Continent. Although he's already in the prime of his life, his skills and strength haven't diminished, and he continues to lead the Paladins on the front lines.

TENSION filled the Order's reception room. Fjord the Stalwart sat across from a young girl who looked no older than ten. She wore her hair in cutely woven braids and dressed in a beautiful, saintly garb. The stately attire seemed to be wearing her, and that, coupled with her nervous fidgeting, only invoked a desire to protect the child. But as someone escorted to this room as a state guest, she wasn't to be viewed as a child.

"Thank you for coming all this way, Saint Lytrain."

"E-Eep...erm, i-it's a pleasure t-to meet you, C-Cap—Commander Fjord."

The girl on the sofa, hugging a large book that nearly hid her from view, was none other than the Scribe Saint Lytrain Nerim Quartz—one of Idoragya's Seven Great Savior Saints, beloved by Qualia's Holy God Arlos. Fjord cut the pleasantries short and cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"I understand you came here on orders from Qualia. What does Central want?"

Fjord needed to uncover what Qualia was after. Lenea and Qualia were already negotiating behind the scenes, but only up to the Cardinal level. The Cardinals didn't steer Qualia—that fell to higher-ranked clergy. Central's Priests and Cardinals were nothing more than underlings—cogs. Lenea needed to know what the real decision-makers were thinking.

"Th-The M-Mystic Saint doesn't seem very interested in this matter," Lytrain stuttered.

"Ooh!" Fjord exclaimed, unable to suppress his internal surprise.

The Mystic Saint held the highest position of power in Qualia. Known as the First Saint, only a handful of high-ranked clergy were allowed to have an audience with her, and some even theorized that she had watched over Qualia since its founding.

Qualia's empire-management was said to be handled by its three popes, but the Mystic Saint pulled the strings. In other words, her will was Qualia's will. And she chose to adopt a wait-and-see policy when it came to Lenea.

This was a godsend if there ever was one. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Arlos had a hand in this fortuitous moment.

Still, Fjord harbored doubts about her stance. He didn't know the Mystic Saint personally, but staying quiet seemed out of character for her.

"But why isn't she concerned with us?"

Lytrain's shoulders trembled at Fjord's quiet query. He didn't know how to respond when she acted so frightened of him for no apparent reason. Before he could say anything, she snapped open the massive journal that earned her the name the Scribe Saint, flipped to a specific page, and began reading its contents aloud.

“W-We’ve received a request for aid from the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals. U-Um, well, it seems the Alliance was attacked and destroyed by a W-Witch called Vagia and her horde of S-Succubi. The Scribe Saint is terribly saddened by this and wants it dealt with immediately.”

“What?!” Fjord cried, startling the poor girl. “The El-Nah Alliance of Elementals was destroyed?!”

It seemed Idoragya as a whole was experiencing more turmoil and chaos than anyone had realized. Fjord had been aware that things were amiss in El-Nah. It was common knowledge among clergy of a certain rank, even if word hadn’t spread to the masses yet.

Simply put, El-Nah was invaded by yet another Witch...

But Fjord was confident that El-Nah wasn’t the kind of country to be destroyed by a lone Witch. They had Elemental Champions on par with Qualia and Lenea’s Paladins, and they even had their own Saints. Elves were at their strongest in the verdant forests that covered their territory, and they knew those wooded depths like the back of their hands.

Every imaginable situation pointed to El-Nah’s victory.

For that reason alone, Qualia hadn’t intervened and took a wait-and-see stance despite knowing about the new threat. They wholeheartedly believed their holy brethren, their sworn allies, would seize victory. That belief, that hope, crumbled like sand before their evil adversaries.

“...I see. That works in our favor.”

“P-Pardon? Wh-What did you say?” Lytrain asked, her lips quivering as her super-hearing picked up on Fjord’s quiet utterance.

Fjord was unfazed by her question. “I simply said yet another outrageous problem has occurred,” he continued. “We still don’t know the whereabouts of the Witch behind the Northern Disturbance, and the emergence of more Witches is a worrying development for us all. The forces of evil are infesting the world. Now is the time for us Warriors of Light to fight bravely as guardians of Arlos’s world.”

“Um...I suppose so,” she responded, sounding unsure.

“Now then, Saint Lytrain, please tell me everything you can. We lack adequate information to slay our foes. We should share what we know and develop countermeasures against the forces of evil.”

“O-Okay...” Lytrain mumbled.

“Thank you,” Fjord nodded, prompting the insecure girl to tell him what she knew so he could discover her true intentions.



FJORD obtained several crucial pieces of information and shared what Qualia might want to know in return. He didn't think the young Saint would remember every detail, and he feared the repercussions if she left anything out. However, what he had learned from her informed him that the world as a whole was in crisis. Never in his wildest dreams did Fjord think the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals would fall. He needed to revise their response to El-Nah.

On the bright side, Lenea now had more time, albeit not much.

Qualia and El-Nah bordered each other on the Lawful Continent. A massive mountain range physically separated the two countries. Exchanges between the two could only be made by taking a narrow and steep path that cut through the mountains, or by making a detour around the northern or southern part of the range. This terrain had become a natural fortress separating Qualia and El-Nah, which hindered Qualia from gathering sufficient information on their ally.

In other words, even if the now-conquered El-Nah set its sights on Qualia next, their only option was to take their armies through the detour route, which would naturally slow their march. And if they took the southern route that traveled along the Dark Continent, they would encounter Lenea first...

That's a problem for another day... I've got more pressing matters to deal with right now.

Fjord was painfully aware of his ever-growing pile of problems. Adding one or two more problems to the pile was inevitable. There wasn't anything he could do to stop the problems from coming in, even if it was becoming fatal to their fledgling nation. Encasing his heart in ice, Fjord decided to handle the problem sitting in front of him first.

"I understand the situation now. I appreciate you sharing this crucial information with us," he told the young Saint. "However, someone of your standing, Saint Lytrain, needn't have come all the way out here just to tell us this. Please tell me what really brings you here."

"Ah, um, well..." She fidgeted and averted her gaze.

Every piece of information she shared was of grave importance. But that wasn't a good enough reason for Saint Lytrain to come herself, not when Qualia's military strength had been weakened by the Southern Province's secession led by two of their former Saints. It was common knowledge that the Mystic Saint never left Central. That left only the Scribe Saint to fend off all attacks. The fact that El-Nah was defeated and conquered meant that their former

allies, the Elves, would become their enemies. This also included the three Saints belonging to the Alliance...

They had no reason to send the Scribe Saint, the only decisive battle weapon Qualia possessed now, to personally inform Lenea of the situation and ask for their cooperation. In which case, the young lady had an entirely different objective in coming here. For example, a terribly personal objective...

“U-Um...please let me see— I mean, please act as the intermediary between High Paladin Verdel and me,” Lytrain nervously but clearly stated her objective.

I knew it, Fjord thought.

He gently nodded to reassure the anxious girl. Then he averted his gaze slightly, his expression growing grave as he recalled her relationship with Verdel.

“Verdel...” he said, sounding thoughtful. “Ah, right! That reminds me, he was your adoptive father, wasn’t he? Forgive me for not remembering sooner. I see, I see. So you came here worried that something happened to your father during the political upheaval.”

“U-Um, er, uh-huh...”

Fjord took her robotic nod as a yes. As a man not used to smiling, he had to force his stiff cheek muscles to twitch upward to assuage her fears. “High Paladin Verdel is currently assigned to a mission in this city. He’s doing well, I assure you.”

“Um, well, he never responds to any of the letters I send anymore...” Lytrain said, sadness and worry lacing her quiet voice.

“I see. That’s because he was on a covert infiltration mission until just recently. He was isolated from all contact due to the nature of his job. I promise he wasn’t ignoring you, Saint Lytrain.”

“Really? He wasn’t...?”

As he watched the nervous tension slip away from Lytrain’s face, Fjord fished through his memories for more details on the girl’s relationship with the gruff High Paladin. It had originally been nothing more or less than an ordinary relationship between daughter and the Paladin who’d adopted her. Whether he had been pushed into the adoption out of harassment from one of the opposing factions or he’d simply awoken to his paternal side, Verdel had taken in and formally adopted the orphaned girl. This wasn’t a particularly rare occurrence for Paladins, who were instructed to behave as model citizens.

The real problem came in when his daughter ended up being chosen as one of Arlos’s Saints. It doesn’t take much to realize why things went south from there. Whether it was due to jealousy, or a desire to reduce their political

influence, Verdel and Lytrain were separated, and groundless rumors were spread about them. In the end, their parent-child relationship was forcefully dissolved.

For as many allies High Paladin Verdel had, he had twice as many enemies.

Lytrain loved and adored her father as a daughter. And Verdel loved her as a daughter. Unfathomable jealousy and contempt surrounded what should have been one of the most natural relationships there is.

...Although their story had already come to an end.

“S-So, um, y-you see, I have a favor to ask of you, Commander Fjord...” Lytrain began, her fingers tightly clenching the book until they turned white.

“You needn’t say another word, Saint Lytrain,” Fjord said, cutting her off before she could finish her request. He knew exactly what she wanted. “Please leave everything to your humble servant, Fjord. I’ll promptly arrange for you to meet with High Paladin Verdel.”

Arranging for such a thing was a piece of cake for Fjord in his position, and he believed it was in the best interest of the forlorn girl seated before him.

“D-Do you mean it?!” she cried, her face lighting up.

“On one condition,” Fjord said, holding up his finger. “It pains me to bring this up, but please understand untoward rumors are circling about you and High Paladin Verdel. Of course, I know that those despicable scandals are nonsense spread by infidels blinded by jealousy. Unfortunately, not everyone agrees with me.”

“Um...that’s...”

“I’m sorry, that was very indirect of me. Please forgive me. Age has a way of making you say more than necessary. To put it simply, nothing good will come of you taking any public action right now, Saint Lytrain. I’ll take care of all the arrangements, so I would like to request you meet with High Paladin Verdel—your father—in private. Can you agree to this condition?”

“Y-Yes! Th-That’s easily within my p-power!”

Her father was the only thing on her mind now.

It was said that the Saints were picked by God and had to offer up something in return for receiving his blessing. So what did this young girl sacrifice? Verdel might’ve been the only family she had, but her excessive level of attachment to her father seemed related to the price she’d paid.

In any event, her circumstances meant little to Fjord. He couldn’t let her be the catalyst that brought Qualia barging into Lenea’s affairs because of the phantom. He needed to keep her focused squarely on her father. Luckily, she seemed uninterested in everything but her father, so Fjord’s proposal was a win-

win.

“Glad to hear it,” Fjord said. “Fortunately, my men are tight-lipped. I swear to you that word of what occurred here today will not get out as long as you keep it to yourself.”

“O-Okay... I can do that.” She nodded several times.

“I know it might come across as a strange request, but our country is still in the process of reform. I would like to suppress any information that would cause further confusion at this time,” Fjord explained as simply as he could. He saw Lytrain furrow her brows in a perplexed look. He put his hand to his head, realizing he said too much. “Forgive me, I’ve gone off on another tangent. Let me tell you the meeting place and time now.”

Lytrain’s whole face lit up like a flower in full bloom with that comment. She pulled a pen from her chest pocket and jotted down the information he gave her.

“Thank you very much for relying on me, Saint Lytrain,” Fjord said, satisfied with her reaction. “We might be of different sects, but we believe in the same God. We want to do whatever it takes to remain on Qualia’s good side. Especially with trouble brewing in El-Nah.”

“Th-Thank you for helping me too!” Lytrain exclaimed.

“I’m glad we could confirm our countries have the same goals. I will convey what you told me today to Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials and Veiled Saint Fenne. I apologize that it isn’t the nicest guest quarters, but please allow me to escort you to an empty room in the Order’s lodgings. You can wait there until the designated meeting time,” Fjord said, naturally escorting the girl to the reception room door. He quietly opened the door and checked to ensure no one was in the hallway.

“E-Excuse me...” Lytrain said to his back.

“Is something the matter? Please let me know if something is on your mind.”

“I heard that G-God descended to give his blessing when L-Lenea was founded,” she said nervously. “Um, does God really exist?”

Fjord’s eyes widened. A Saint shouldn’t doubt God’s existence. Lytrain seemed to have realized her mistake after the fact, and she started waving her hands around, as if to reject she ever said anything.

Fjord’s steely expression fell when he saw her panicking. Instead of telling her not to worry about it, he lightly shook his head and offered her a gentle smile. “Yes, God does exist. And he is watching over us from a closer place than we realize.”

Lytrain placed a hand on her chest and smiled, relieved by his reply. Fjord

watched her for a long moment before escorting her to her quarters.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Current status of each empire:

Mynoghra

- Operation Rescue Atou is currently underway.
- Due to the temporary withdrawal of Commander Takuto Ira, Domestic Affairs are on pause, but the military is being reorganized in the meantime.
- Status: At War

Phon'kaven

- Dealing with monsters on the border with Lenea.
- Currently running recon against Lenea.
- Status: Neutral

Divine Nation of Lenea

- Determined that the serial murders of Paladins are the work of the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira, and are continuing their investigation.
- The Commanders are preparing for potential war.
- Status: Casus Belli is in effect

The Holy Kingdom of Qualia

- Focused on rebuilding the Northern Province and rescuing the El-Nah Alliance of Elementals.
- On orders from the Mystic Saint, they are just observing the Divine Nation of Lenea.
- Status: Casus Belli is in effect

The El-Nah Alliance of Elementals

- Situation unknown. Some information states a Witch destroyed them, but it's unconfirmed.
- Status: Unknown.

Chapter 6: Insight

AMID the dysfunction plaguing the Divine Nation of Lenea's political center, someone was enjoying the dumpster fire much like a third party watching a disaster movie rather than being a part of it.

Sludge Atou was the person in question.

"I don't have the full picture, haha!"

In the private chambers assigned to her within St. Amritate Cathedral—Lenea's empire-management headquarters—Atou gave up trying to find an impossible solution to the problems bombarding the country. She decided to just wait until the idea came to her.

Now that she was free from her role as Mynoghra's second-in-command and had her own room, Atou could enjoy flopping back onto her bed and rolling around like it was nobody's business.



SQUEEZE

“Ahh,” she moaned. “Lazing around in bed in the middle of the day is the best...”

She was enjoying the ultimate laziness possible. She would be in for a full four-hour lecture from Elder Moltar if he ever found her like this in Mynoghra.

Unfortunately, she was affiliated with Lenea—or, more accurately, she was an NPC belonging to a tabletop role-playing game now. So there was no one to give her harsh but honest advice when she shut herself away in her room and took a nice, long breather. Not that anyone here had any right to critique her.

Although the Game Master had fundamentally changed her alignment to his own, Atou was originally a Witch belonging to an enemy empire. Lenea needed to treat her like a ticking timebomb that could go off on them at any moment—not someone they’d want getting involved in running their nation, no matter how shorthanded they were. At the end of the day, Lenea’s leadership found Atou’s natural airheadedness to be too much to handle now that she was freed from the constraints of being affiliated with Mynoghra.

But Atou’s attitude wasn’t the only issue Lenea had.

“Still though, there’s a limit to how lazy you can be,” Atou said to herself. “Saints Soalina and Fenne seem kinda reserved and estranged from each other, and Witch Erakino is a pushover. And Commander Fjord, the guy who actually does all the work, has gone kinda AWOL, doing his own thing. And then there’s me, holed up in my room because I find their prickliness disagreeable... Huh? Putting it like that, it seems like the Commanders of this nation are relatively screwed, doesn’t it?”

Lenea’s problems stemmed first and foremost from a lack of unification among its leadership. Standing at the top of the food chain were two inexperienced Saints, with a Witch and a Game Master thrown into the mix as oddballs. The priests governing the cities and villages had begun doing things at their own discretion due to the delay in instructions from the Cathedral. And then there was the mess with the Order of Paladins, resulting in Fjord openly avoiding the Saints.

Lenea was currently like a multi-headed beast, where each head was trying to take the body in a different direction, resulting in it going nowhere.

“Keep this up, and King Takuto will conquer them in no time. Isn’t that right, my king?” Atou asked the peculiar Takuto doll she was lovingly embracing. The lump of cloth and cotton she’d spent all her time crafting into a makeshift doll was far from perfect, but it spoke volumes about how much free time she had to kill.

She wasn’t entirely uninterested in the Paladin Murder Cases. The serial murders were the work of none other than Takuto, after all. They might be

adversaries now, but as a woman who lived by a Takuto-first mindset, Atou had no reason not to devote her thoughts to matters where he was concerned. And so, it had become her daily routine to stare at the Takuto doll on her bed and speculate about her former master's schemes.

Assuming King Takuto is the one causing this series of incidents, he must have a reason for it. Well, I know his primary, most wonderful objective is getting me back. But this is a very roundabout way of doing that.

Atou heard someone hastily running through the hallway outside her room. She assumed it was the sound of a clergyman rushing back to work after oversleeping during his short nap. Atou no longer had any concept of work, so his plight was none of her concern.

Is he playing it safe because he's wary of the GM's abilities? No, that can't be it. King Takuto must have established some sort of defense against the GM's ability since they still can't identify the culprit behind the murders. If he does have a defense against it, you'd think he'd rescue me right away.

Warm sunlight streamed into the room through the windows. Atou was still evil-aligned, but perhaps her association with the TRPG forces dulled the negative effects of sunlight, as it comfortably lulled her into sleepiness.

What is King Takuto thinking? Or rather, what is he waiting for?

Atou had asked herself that question a thousand times already. The answer didn't make itself known as time idly passed by in vain. She kept circling back to the thought that he hadn't established a countermeasure yet, but the Paladins wouldn't keep dying if he hadn't. The most straightforward conclusion would be that he was doing this to reduce enemy numbers—but that wasn't it. Murdering the Paladins was the means to an end—not the end objective in and of itself.

Takuto was trying to do something through these murders.

No matter how she thought about it, Atou couldn't figure out what that something was. She felt it was something he couldn't do if Lenea's leadership was unified and had proper communication.

Atou held the Takuto doll over her head and stared at it hard. She must've squeezed it a little too tightly, because his already deformed face crumpled under her grip.

"C-Could it be...you're actually a tad angry, King Takuto?"

Atou suddenly had a very bad feeling. Even if she hadn't willingly pierced Takuto's heart, her tentacle definitely did the deed. There was no guarantee she hadn't incurred his wrath by betraying him, whatever the circumstances that led to that heinous act.

Once the thought occurred to Atou, her anxiety swelled, and she felt like she could hear the crushed Takuto doll whisper, "...I hate you, Atou."

“I couldn’t live with myself if that’s true!” Atou cried at the top of her lungs.

She heard someone bang loudly on the wall from the next room over to shut her up, and she clapped a hand to her mouth. She wasn’t reacting that way out of consideration for the person next door—she wanted to dispel the discomforting anxiety eating away at her.

“King Takuto is definitely the type to never forgive those who oppose him. Anyone who underestimates him is doomed. His revenge is always a hundred times worse than what was done to him. He’s like an unstoppable knife that has left the concepts of mercy and forgiveness behind once unleashed! Oooh, please forgive me, my king! What have I done! I’ve gone and failed you!!”

The malice and murderous intent gleaming in Atou’s crimson eyes belied her words. She would kill Takuto if he appeared in front of her. She held reverence akin to a budding love for him, yet she could still kill someone who meant so much to her. Was that the result of the GM’s brainwashing? Or was it simply her innate nature? Either way, Atou had the right mentality to be labeled a Witch.

“But, my king? What methods are you using to make this possible?” she wondered. She came back to this same question, despite never finding the answer. “No Hero in *Eternal Nations* has an ability that could help, as far as I know. Even if you had summoned that swindler of a Hero, he shouldn’t be capable of sealing the GM’s abilities and causing the series of mysterious events that are happening now...”

Until now, Atou had been trying to figure out Takuto’s abilities and methods from how he’d been killing the Paladins. But that was of minor importance when it came to the bigger picture. She felt like she was overlooking something fundamental. Without remembering that fundamental factor, she couldn’t put the pieces together.

With the knowledge she had of him right now, Takuto should have never survived the injuries he’d sustained in Lenea’s surprise attack. Some sort of gimmick had to be at work—some sort of game mechanic—but nothing in her memories fit.

“Hmm...mmm...?” she groaned.

Or at least, there shouldn’t have been anything that fit.

“Wait...? I feel like I’m forgetting something.”

She had this niggling feeling like a splinter stuck in her finger. The answer was almost on the tip of her tongue. And yet she couldn’t recall enough to form a full thought about what that was. It was that kind of strange sensation.

As someone who’d played hundreds of thousands of rounds with Takuto

and who knew almost everything there was to know about *Eternal Nations*, she couldn't shake this nagging feeling.

The problem was that this was an improbable premonition to have about Takuto Ira. Under any other circumstances, she would have forgotten all about this disconcerting feeling. But luck was on her side this time.

"Oh, that reminds me, there's a perfect way to deal with things I've forgotten. I'm a member of the TRPG club, so I can roll the dice for answers, too," Atou realized in a moment of divine insight.

It was impossible to learn anything to do with the Paladin Murders. Lenea had reached a dead end no matter how many times they tried, changed their questions, or how they went about it. It was also impossible to unravel Takuto's secrets directly. Erakino and the others experimented in every way possible and never got anywhere.

But it should be easy to derive the identity of Atou's inkling of a suspicion. She had merely forgotten something. How could Takuto possibly prevent her from remembering what she already knew?

She didn't need to use the GM's overpowered abilities for something as simple as this. She could just roll the dice herself. If her roll failed, then...she could hunt down Erakino and ask her to put in a request with the Game Master, even if she hated the thought of it. Thinking of it that way, it was an easy task with no downsides.

"It's a tad inappropriate given the situation, but I feel kind of excited!"

It shouldn't be that big of a deal, since it was something she couldn't remember even when she tried. There was something novel and entertaining about using another game's mechanics, especially when she'd lived her whole life as a 4x game character.

Everything is fun the first time you try it. Even if nothing comes of it, I'll still get to experience something new. With that casual feeling, Sludge Atou rolled the dice.

"Um, rolling for Insight! Make me remember what I'm forgetting about King Takuto!"

Atou rolls 1d100=98 for Insight

Outcome: Success. Atou can more easily recall her memories!

With that, fate changed.

"Huh? What a strange ability. I assume it succeeded? Let's see, hm, I'm starting to remember now. Takuto Ira, who has taken on the name of the King of Ruin..."

Atou nodded along to the memories for a bit, until one suddenly made her jaw drop and her eyes spread wide. The excitement gave way to her face draining color...

“...No! It can’t be!!”

She finally remembered the bit of information she’d forgotten since coming to this world. That revelation dealt a fatal blow to her.



“**YOU** want to...talk?”

“Yes, that’s right, Saint Soalina. To tell you the truth, I have some reservations about this phantom. I would really like to consult you on the matter.”

In an unknown, deserted corner of St. Amritate Cathedral, Saint Soalina received a peculiar request from High Paladin Fjord. She couldn’t read his intentions behind the highly irregular proposition. And the situation she found herself in was even weirder. It was strange enough that he had found her in this seldom-visited reference room deep below the Cathedral. It was even stranger that he wished to speak completely alone and out of sight. If that wasn’t alarming enough, she felt an overwhelming, mysterious pressure coming from High Paladin Fjord, unlike anything she’d sensed from him before.

Something about him differed greatly from all the other times he’d consulted her and given reports.

“Um, then please let me gather the others—”

“...Don’t.”

He shot down her hesitant suggestion. It seemed he wanted to consult her about something he didn’t want Fenne or Erakino to know about. Soalina’s suspicions ballooned, but being bewildered was about the only thing she could do right now.

“Please let me confirm this with you alone, Saint Soalina. If my fears are founded, then we must proceed with the utmost caution.”

Fjord had picked the one phrase she couldn’t refute.

What was he about to confide in her? Soalina could only give a reluctant nod in response to his overpowering intensity.

Elemental Ward Rulebook

Outcomes

The success or failure of a character's actions is determined based on the data assigned to each action and the outcome sheet.

The basic data is described in the rulebook, but if it's deemed necessary for the scenario, it can be changed. Also, if it's considered necessary to determine outcomes or actions that don't exist in the rulebook, the GM must present an appropriate ruling method and make a judgment call.

In principle, the consent of all participants is required when making decisions outside the rulebook, and arbitrary rulings that benefit specific participants are not permitted.

- ※ However, in cases where the complexity of the outcome affects the gameplay, it's possible to make the ruling without using the chit system of random number generation or dice if all participants consent.
- ※ Players must also present reasoning that all participants agree to when disputing the GM's ruling, and they must always come up with a solution when dissatisfied.
- ※ The purpose of this game is for everyone to have the best experience, not for any one player to win or maximize their interests in the game. Selfish actions can greatly impair the game experience for everyone involved.
- ※ Play the game cooperatively, recognizing that the participants are not customers or just an audience, but co-creators playing the game with the GM.

Chapter 7: Orders

THE night before a storm can sometimes give people an incomprehensible sense of eeriness. A strange feeling accompanied the uncommon rain shower sprinkling the Dark Continent that night.

“Hrm...”

Elder Moltar scrutinized a scrap of paper where he sat at a small, temporary desk erected for him in Dragontan’s mayoral office. Written in neat penmanship was the riddle Takuto had left for him to solve upon his resurrection. The riddle wanted him to figure out how Takuto had survived the surprise attack.

Written on it were the following seven true statements in the king’s own words:

- 1. I took a direct hit from Atou’s attack and died on the spot.*
- 2. Saint Soalina’s flames also caused my death.*
- 3. I don’t have any recovery skills to heal my own injuries.*
- 4. It was me, not a body double, an alter ego, another organism, or an illusion that was attacked.*
- 5. I didn’t die and resurrect or loop.*
- 6. I escaped this crisis without the intervention of a third party.*
- 7. All of these events actually happened.*

Seven statements comprised the entire riddle and contained all the secrets. The elderly sage had difficulty wrapping his head around the confounding riddle with all the prerequisites built into it.

“No matter how I think about it, I can’t come up with an answer... I know His Majesty used a method we aren’t privy to, but what could have possibly saved him from those circumstances?”

At the end of his rope, Elder Moltar leaned heavily back in his chair, the wood groaning beneath him. The light cast by the candles on top of the desk wavered with the movement, and the sound of rain pelting the ground outside was soothing to the ears. The quiet relieved some of his mounting fatigue. Elder Moltar massaged his aching shoulders and was about to finish up his remaining work, when—

“Oh man, you’re still trying to figure that out, huh?”

—someone suddenly spoke to him from behind.

“Ooooooooooh! My king! I’m sorry you had to see me slacking off like this. I would have come to you myself if you had summoned for me—” Elder Moltar responded to his king as usual, but he trailed off when he realized this conversation shouldn’t be possible. “Y-Your Majesty! When did you get here?!”

“That’s the second time I’ve heard that tonight. Makes me kind of happy that everyone’s so surprised to see me when I show up like this though.”

Laughing like a child who’d successfully pulled off a prank was none other than the king of Mynoghra—the being Elder Moltar worshiped and served with all his heart and soul. Elder Moltar’s nervous tension shot into high gear, and his brain seemed to short-circuit from information overload at his liege’s sudden appearance.

“Y-Your Majesty,” Elder Moltar stammered. “How in the Dark Continent are you here?! Weren’t you infiltrating Qualia?!”

He needed the answer to that question more than any other. It was unfeasible for Takuto to be in Dragontan when he was infiltrating Qualia—or, more precisely, Lenea—to retrieve Atou.

Dragontan was a long distance from the Divine Nation of Lenea. It didn’t matter that they were relatively close geographically—it still took days by foot to make the journey. Of course, it was far too irreverent to compare their king’s physical prowess to that of peddlers and travelers, but even so, it should take him several days at best.

Monsters had also appeared on the border between the two continents, bringing a contingency of Paladins and Phon’kaven elites there to deal with the threat. Going through such a dangerous zone for a quick visit was too risky and would take longer than it was worth.

“You could say that. I used *magik*.”

Elder Moltar scratched his head at the suggestive, irregular way Takuto emphasized magic. But since he left it at that, Elder Moltar refrained from inquiring further.

The complex abyss that is magic knows no bounds.

Surely King Takuto had skills and spells that Elder Moltar did not. As the old sage attempted to convince himself with that logic, the conversation progressed in a different direction.

“Anyways, where’s everybody else? Are they already asleep?”

“No, we were just taking a brief break. I’m sure they will be back soon...” Elder Moltar paused for a moment before bellowing, “Forgive me! My liege’s

return is of the utmost importance! I will go fetch the others at once!”

“**Nah, you don’t have to rush them...**” Takuto couldn’t help but remonstrate Elder Moltar when he saw him getting too worked up for his age. But he broke out into a cold sweat when he heard what the old sage had to say in return.

“Nonsense! We have a literal mountain of things to tell and ask you about, Your Majesty! Time is of the essence! I will promptly gather the council members, so please wait here for a spell! You hear me?! Don’t you go wandering off now! Wait right here! Right HERE!”

“**Haha...hahahaaa...**”

I’m in for a real squeeze here, aren’t I? Takuto thought.

Takuto had been leading his Dark Elf subordinates around by the nose since the surprise attack. Of course he had proper cause, and it’d brought about good results. Even so, he finally had to face the reality he’d been ignoring—he was in for an earful and there was no getting out of it.



“**MY** king!! How it pleases me to see you safe and sound! Please punish us for failing you!”

“I am so, so relieved to see you. I was really worried for a moment there...”

“Welcome home, Your Majesty!”

“Welcome back, Your Majesty.”

Gia and Emle wept upon reuniting with their king. Meanwhile, the Elfuur Sisters were far more casual with welcoming him back since they had been communicating through telepathy the whole time. Aside from the prominent council members, Mayor Antelise and several other high-ranking officials had gathered.

Takuto sat down on the couch with a sheepish smile as more than a few people expressed joy over seeing him.

“**Wow, is it just me, or is it getting hot in here?**” he joked.

They had gathered in the town hall’s reception room. Takuto lounged on the guest couch, and the Elfuur Sisters took their natural positions on either side of him. Elder Moltar and Emle sat directly across from them, while everyone else stood at attention around the two couches, adding quite a bit of tension to the room.

They should’ve met in a much larger room, but Takuto had rejected the

idea, leading to this odd arrangement. He felt their voices would be heard better in a smaller space, especially with the downpour outside. Everyone felt a little bad for those who had to stay standing, but none complained or even thought about such a trivial detail.

“Okay, now that we’re all here...where should we begin?” Takuto said, starting the meeting. **“First things first, have you prepared everything I asked for?”**

Everyone knew what this meeting was really about. The time had finally come for the carefully planted seeds of revenge to bear fruit.

“Yes, everything is going according to plan,” Emle answered first. “We’ve stabilized things domestically and controlled the information the citizens can access without a hitch.”

“Some citizens may harbor doubts about your absence, Your Majesty, but nothing more than that,” Elder Moltar swiftly interjected. “The Divine Nation of Lenea has been spreading their nonsensical delusions, but it hasn’t influenced anything domestically.”

“Okay. Good job.”

The domestic situation seemed to be under control. Takuto could confirm the situation by using his Commander authority to see through his citizens’ and units’ eyes, but it was reassuring to hear a status report in person as well. He’d had some concerns about pulling back and handing control of his empire over, but his people had lived up to his expectations in every way. Although it goes without saying that the adults—starting with Elder Moltar—were about as useful as a fish out of water in the beginning. The two girls sitting on either side of Takuto deserved the most credit for getting the job done.

“As for Phon’kaven, they’re currently dealing with the monsters that appeared on the continental border. They seem to be encroaching into Qualia’s—pardon me, Lenea’s territory. How would you like to proceed, Your Majesty?”

“I’ve already consulted with Pepe on the matter, so we don’t need to take any other action,” Takuto replied. **“Our allies want to get some actual combat experience and fertile land, so considering the future, it’s the right decision for them to take what they can. We don’t have any reason to interfere.”**

Takuto could feel everyone’s questioning gaze on him. They were all wondering: “When did you get the chance to meet with Phon’kaven?” He could tell them, but they had more important things to discuss with their limited time, so Takuto brushed over it.

He could explain his *magik* some other time. What mattered was telling them the results of the negotiations between their two nations—not how they’d

negotiated. Elder Moltar and the others seemed to understand Takuto's intent, since they didn't comment. They also didn't inquire about what the Commanders of both empires had decided to do beyond what Takuto had deigned to tell them.

"Sounds like we're good to go on the domestic affairs side," Takuto continued. **"Regarding military affairs, how many rapid response squads have you put together? I put in the request through Caria and Maria to have the squads formed."**

A rapid response force was crucial to this operation. Mynoghra needed at least one squadron that could be put into immediate action. Since the force needed to be a decent size, it was crucial that it was made up of not only Mynoghra's strongest soloing units, but also squadrons of Dark Elf Warriors armed with guns.

"We were able to slap one together. I mean, we really *slapped* it together... I never, ever wanna do that again," Maria complained.

"The Warriors came together without issue, but the birdbrains and the buggies kept throwing tantrums, saying they won't listen to anyone but Your Majesty. It was a real pain to make work. Aren't you glad you could go out and have fun while we did all the work?" Caria said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I-I see..."

Seeing how the twins were moodier toward him than usual helped Takuto realize it was still nighttime, even if the moon wasn't out. *I really put the girls through a lot so I could fulfill my own ambitions. I need to take the time to properly thank them and reward them for it later*, he thought, keeping the wry smile causing his lips to twitch in check. Fortunately, their hard work had paid off in spades.

"Allow your humble servant, Gia, to explain the particulars," Gia interpolated. "Our armed Dark Elf Riflemen squad is ready to sortie on your order. In addition to that, we've formed a Monster Squadron, consisting of the designated number of Bugs under your control. They're on standby in the Accursed Lands."

"Good, good! That's perfect."

"Then I take it we're finally declaring war on Lenea and dispatching our army? Please allow me to serve as the vanguard!" Gia requested in a rumbling voice. "I'll make up for failing you by rescuing Lady Atou from the clutches of the enemy!!"

"Ah, yeah, I plan to assign you all to handle another matter. I'll be the one to take back Atou," Takuto avowed, promptly shutting down Gia's proclamation.

Everyone shared confused looks. Gia always declared his intentions to run recklessly into the heart of battle, but all of Mynoghra assumed they would be marching their armies into Lenea this time. They assumed that, while Mynoghra's forces fought against Lenea's Order of Paladins, a special squadron would break off to rescue Atou and attempt to take out the Saints. They believed that Takuto's infiltration into the enemy nation was the preliminary step toward that end.

But Takuto easily dismissed their preconceptions. It seemed to them that the grand scheme of things was yet to make itself known.

"But then...I can't save face by serving as your shield or the outrider!!" Gia cried.

"Yeah. The thought is enough. To be brutally honest, we're up against an opponent that's too much for you to handle."

Takuto's remark threw cold water all over Gia and the rest of the hotheaded bunch. They had tried not to think about it, but the cruel reality was that Mynoghra's forces couldn't deal the killing blow against the enemy during Operation Rescue Atou.

"Your Majesty... What in the world are we up against?" Elder Moltar asked on behalf of the group.

On that fateful day, they had tasted true despair. Their king had been slain before their very eyes and their do-or-die resistance was nullified.

What kind of trickery had been at work? What kind of ability or skills had been used?

The enemies' abilities were as cloaked in mystery as Takuto's miraculous resurrection.

"We're up against people who've got the power of a tabletop RPG. Their powers are much like mine...while also entirely different," Takuto told them in a quiet voice.

"A tabletop *R-P-G*?" Elder Moltar repeated, trying to sound out the unfamiliar phrase.

Since it was a term no one recognized, they assumed it came from the Land of the Gods King Takuto often mentioned, but that was the extent of their speculations.

Even Takuto realized they needed an explanation on this topic, so he went with a vague answer, rather than outright ignore telling them anything as he had with several other topics that evening.

"Hmm, it's hard to explain. Put in the simplest of terms, it's an ability that allows you to decide the outcome of actions by rolling dice."

The shocking truth had finally been revealed to them.

A tabletop RPG's ability was essentially a Gambler's ability. It treats every action as a gamble and allows the intervention of fate indicated by the dice. In other words, no matter how hard you work and how much power you have, if you're unlucky, you'll die, and no matter how incompetent and powerless you are, if you're lucky, you'll live.

A series of ad hoc matches that negate all preconditions—that was their opponent's power in a nutshell.

From there, Takuto revealed the additional information he'd gleaned during his time away. He briefly explained the Game Master's existence, the Witch who served under him, and about the Saints who'd accepted the Witch, joined hands with her, and taken over Qualia's former Southern Province together. He clarified how they were up against forces just like them, just with different players.

The news sent shockwaves through the Dark Elves. They knew they were up against Saints, but not that they'd joined forces with evil. Nor did they ever imagine that the enemy Witch and her master were equivalent to gods, like Takuto. What surprised them most was the truth behind the strange power that negated all resistance the day the enemy had attacked.

"So, if I'm understanding this right, my liege, our attacks didn't connect because the dice roll resulted in our failure?" Elder Moltar speculated.

If that was how it worked, then the enemy had a higher chance of failing if one thing went wrong. But the enemy won the day, meaning they continued to beat the odds with every roll, or so Elder Moltar assumed.

"No, that happened because the GM forcibly issued a successful outcome with his authority as Arbiter," Takuto corrected.

This revelation was so out of left field it took time to comprehend.

"The enemy ringleader—the Game Master, or GM for short—has the power to determine the outcome of any event," Takuto explained. **"For example, even if something comes up black, if he says it's white, then it'll become white. No matter how strong of an army we put together, we'll lose the second the GM decides to make his victory the outcome."**

This additional information rendered everyone—including the Elfuur Sisters—speechless. Their opponent wasn't gambling and leaving their fate to chance. They were cheating from the start—they would always pick the outcome most in their favor. There was no game to be played—their opponent had already rigged the match for their victory and Mynoghra's defeat.

"Atou was only stolen because of this crooked ability. If he'd played by the rules, it wouldn't have been easy for him to take her even if his rolls succeeded. He forced the outcome," Takuto spat, his expression and tone

twisting with the bitterness he felt.

He regretted the loss of Atou more than his personal defeat. Their enemy was that powerful.

“Your Majesty, is Atou...is Lady Atou all right?!” Emle cried out, unable to keep herself in check once Atou was brought up.

Everyone was sick with worry over their Hero’s safety. As a fellow woman and someone who’d relied on Atou for all sorts of things when it came to managing Mynoghra, Emle felt twice as much concern for her than the rest. Tears swam in her misty eyes and her voice quivered as she asked after Atou.

“Atou...”

Emle shuddered at the quiet way in which Takuto uttered her name with an undefinable emotion behind it. She was worried that perhaps Atou was in a far worse situation than any of them dared imagine. A part of her had optimistically believed Atou was okay because Takuto had been, and he’d even gone in person to infiltrate the country that took her. But Takuto’s single utterance swept her groundless optimism away, replacing it with an avalanche of crippling anxiety.

Takuto took a good look at everyone’s pained expressions and did his best to play it cool as he explained Atou’s current status. **“H-How do I put it? She was taking it easier than I expected, so I don’t think you’ve got to worry about her.”**

“Huh?” was the collective reaction. The general confusion threw the heavy atmosphere out the window as everyone pierced Takuto with curious, questioning gazes.

“...Pardon me, my liege, but what do you mean by ‘She was taking it easy’?” Elder Moltar asked on behalf of everyone else. Deep creases formed between his brow as he stroked his beard.

“It means she wasn’t doing a lick of work. She was lazing about every day, eating all of Lenea’s delicious local specialty dishes...”

That shut the room up. All the seriousness shattered just like that. The twins sported awfully evil smiles as the veins bulged in their temples, and even Emle—the most worried of the lot—cradled her head in her hand, utterly exasperated.

Mynoghra’s Hero, whose safety everyone was concerned about, had somehow completely adapted to life with the enemy.

“She surrrrrre became a free spirit after she was released from being my subordinate...” Takuto whispered darkly.

No one dared respond to him. He refrained from mentioning it to preserve her honor, but he’d actually observed Atou’s every move without her knowledge. He had witnessed everything from her lovey-dovey exposition on

him during her meetings with the Saints to the conversations she held day and night with the ugly Takuto doll she'd stitched together. Only Atou was unaware of him. She'd definitely roll around on the floor, screaming into her arms in embarrassment if she knew he was watching. Luckily, Takuto vowed to take those memories to the grave with him.

“W-Well, I mean, she was Brainwashed! It makes sense the enemy has messed with her mind, right?! We need to get her home, pronto! It'd be terrible to leave her like that!!”

Takuto attempted to help her save face, but it was a poor attempt. As it was, Atou was a free spirit even when she served him, so no one believed his insistence that it was the Brainwashing's fault.

Everyone felt confused and angry, wondering what was wrong with her. They also felt relieved to know she was safe. In the end, the Dark Elves accepted it as a part of Atou's eccentricity and switched gears to focus on what they could contribute to dealing with the crisis facing Mynoghra.

“But, Your Majestyyy, how'll we defeat the baddies?” Maria asked.

“That's an excellent question, Big Sista,” Caria chimed in. “We're guaranteed to lose if our foes wield godly powers. I don't see any weaknesses we can take advantage of. And then there's Miss Atou. She might be out of a job, but she's still with the enemy. We need to free her from the Brainwashing before bringing her home...even if she's become a jobless shut-in.”

The twins still sounded like they had an ax or two to grind.

Maybe I should've come during the afternoon? Takuto thought, feeling a bit weak in the knees confronting the girls when they said exactly what was on their minds. But their concerns were valid and worth considering.

The TRPG system made Lenea a force to be reckoned with. There wasn't any margin for error with the GM using and abusing every aspect of those mechanics.

He had the power to adjudicate all matters. A game master's authority should be wielded with moderation and good sense, but once they stop playing fair, there's almost no way to resist their power.

Yes, *almost* none.

In other words...there was still a means to resist.

“Few things in this world are perfect. And when it comes to humans, imperfect is a more apt description. Even godly powers have flaws when wielded by mortals.”

Takuto had succeeded in hiding his actions from the GM using a certain method. That success was what Takuto wanted most from his venture into the lands of Lenea—a hint about how to defeat the infallible authority of the Arbiter.

Takuto had returned to Dragontan only after laying all the groundwork for his next big operation.

“Boo, don’t be a meanie!”

“H-How did you do that?!”

Annoyed complaints rose from either side of him.

Did I say something to upset them? Takuto panicked for a moment until a rare moment of insight helped him realize what they were upset about without them having to spell it out for him. In short, it was time to reveal the truth.

“Ah, yeah, I guess it’s about time to check your answer! I mean, I did think I made it overly complicated...” Takuto pointed to Elder Moltar’s chest as he spoke, then formed a square with his fingertips.

Elder Moltar contemplated what that gesture meant for a few seconds before saying “Oooh!” and pulling a scrap of paper out of his chest pocket.

Takuto watched as Elder Moltar gingerly laid that paper on top of the table, and then he regaled them with the tale of what had happened that dark day. What he did to survive that day...



“OKAY, why don’t we go over it one more time? The primary objective behind this operation is to recover Atou. The secondary objective is annihilating the enemy Saints and Witch,” Takuto said in a commanding voice.

No one said a word.

“I’ll deal with the GM’s Arbiter ability. It has a fatal defect.”

They were speechless because they caught a glimpse of Takuto’s power.

“What I need you to do for me is help clean up after the fact. It’s a bit much for me to wipe an entire country off the map alone, after all.”

They were having a hard time wrapping their heads around it all. They could see how it was possible. Takuto’s ability was on par with the GM’s when it came to godliness. However, everyone struggled to process what even made him think about wiping a country off the face of the planet. They could only guess that a being without a soul would be capable of such thoughts.

“The whole continent will likely be plunged into chaos after we finish this operation, but it is what it is. This is what they get for taking Atou from me.”

They only understood that they were looking at a being not of this world—a being beyond their imagination—a truly godlike entity.

“Oh, right, why don’t we come up with a good operation name while we’re at it?!” Takuto said cheerfully. **“Um...let’s go with Operation Decapitate the Divine Nation!”**

At the same time, they learned that he possessed enough malevolence and evil intentions worthy of calling himself the King of Ruin, and most of all, beneath his boyish smile was an evil so great it threatened to overwhelm anyone who attempted to define it...

“Be thorough with the clean-up, okay? I’m the type who gets even with those who’ve wronged me.”

The King of Ruin gave his empire orders on this day. His operation name and methods mirrored that of his enemies’—just another way he would get revenge.

SYSTEM MESSAGE

Takuto Ira has been reinstated as Commander.

Commencing Operation Decapitate the Divine Nation.

Certain actions can't be taken until the operation ends or is suspended.

Chapter 8: Upheaval

A woman let out a ghastly scream in St. Amritate Cathedral's storage room that was originally used to store ritual implements, but now housed official documents instead.

"Wh-What are you doing?! Please stop this!" the young nun cried, her eyes filling with tears. This pitiful former village girl was half-forcefully summoned from a peaceful farming village in the Southern Province and, for some reason or another, ordered to look after the approval forms and other such paperwork stored in this room.

"Oh, just zip it already! I don't have time for you right now! We can clean up later!"

"That's too irresponsible!!"

She was confronting none other than Mynoghra's Hero, Sludge Atou. Frightened though she was, the nun desperately pleaded with her to stop her rampage through the area God had tasked her to protect. Atou ignored her pleas as she turned the room inside out. The stacks of paper neatly organized by the dutiful and meticulous nun had been pulled apart and sent raining down on the room like a paper blizzard by Atou.

Mountains formed from the papers Atou tossed aside once she was finished with them. The nun watched in horror as she remembered all the nights she'd spent sorting those documents, believing they might be needed someday.

Why did I even waste my time? she wondered, tears spilling from her eyes, causing her to question her existence.

"Saint Fenne! This is the room!"

"Ooh! The Veiled Saint came herself!"

A helping hand came just in time to make the situation right. Another nun tasked with maintaining the same storage room had gone and brought back Veiled Saint Fenne.

The woman ransacking the room was a guest of honor with a very delicate position in the Cathedral. Atou wasn't a part of the official chain of command, but telling her to do anything required direct orders from the Saints. She was too important to Lenea to treat her any other way.

I can't believe she was able to bring a very busy, rarely-seen Saint here...! The nun offered up a prayer of gratitude to God, and inwardly cried, *If only she*

came a little faster!!

Setting aside the nun's grievances, Fenne's jaw dropped a little when she saw the carnage.

"Atou... What *are* you doing, hm?"

Fenne could tell Atou had taken an interest in the old records. Even so, she was going about it all too carelessly and imprudent, even for her. Atou understood Lenea was under immense pressure. Fenne thought it odd that their ally was not only not doing any work but also going out of her way to increase their problems. She stepped into the room, thinking she might need to give the Witch a good scolding depending on her answer, but...

Atou jumped away from her in what could only be called an overreaction.

"...What's the matter?" Fenne asked, confused. "You're acting funny."

Atou was visibly rejecting her. Out of suspicion? As a Saint, Fenne had met many different people and gone through all sorts of experiences, so she was especially sensitive to these types of reactions and emotions. She could easily tell Atou was suspicious of her, but she had no idea why.

The GM's Brainwashing...hadn't been removed. If it had been, Atou would've immediately turned on them and slaughtered every living, breathing thing in the Cathedral. She was simply poring through past records. Fenne thought the more likely answer was that Atou had caught onto something they hadn't and was looking into it. However...

"Fenne," Atou called her name, her tone serious. "Can you prove that you are really your one and true self?"

"...Pardon?" Fenne squeaked despite herself, surprised by the strangeness of Atou's inquiry. The question threw her for such a loop, she struggled to pull herself back together. "Is this a philosophical question? Or a theological one? We're short on time, so now's not a good time for such a deep discussion..." she finally replied after giving the query some thought.

Fenne didn't know her intentions, but they wouldn't get anywhere if she didn't at least ask. She never expected Atou to question her own existence and become absorbed in deep thinking, but it was a friend's job to hear each other out during such times.

"I was wondering the same thing!" Atou cried. "Aaaah, sheesh! This gimmick is seriously annoying, King Takuto! Fenne, come here for a second!"

"Ah! H-Hey, don't yank on me like that..."

So much for thinking she was being contemplative. Seeing how Atou was essentially making a fuss by herself, Fenne's initial guess was off the mark. If that wasn't jarring enough, Atou's skittish demeanor changed, and she tugged Fenne into the room with her.

“Take a look at this,” Atou demanded, waving several documents in front of Fenne’s face before she could utter a word of complaint.

Fenne looked skeptically through the papers and quickly realized they were familiar, recent forms.

“These are some of the decrees I issued,” Fenne confirmed. “This one is regarding the Order, this is regarding the governance of towns, and this is... What in Arlos’s world is this?”

A Saint’s decree carried immense legal and religious authority. As the select few capable of receiving God’s oracles, the Saints held very delicate positions of power in government. Anyone who worshipped the Holy God Arlos treated the Saints’ words as coming from Arlos himself. To convey those holy words correctly, they were always recorded on paper in a specific format.

Truth be told, they had been using the official format in a practical sense to avoid hindrances to the chain of command and the accurate transmission of the decree. Even so, every word had been recorded without mistake and approved by the person responsible for the decree.

One of the pages Atou had handed Fenne was indeed a decree the Veiled Saint had personally recorded. Everything from the unique stamp to her signature was all Fenne’s. And yet...the unthinkable had happened.

“...I didn’t write this,” she said, her mouth drying out.

Fenne didn’t recall writing that decree.

“Yo, yo, yo! Hiya there, friends! Anyone know where Soali is?”

A bright voice called out from the doorway, unaware of Fenne’s shock over the strange matter brought to her attention. Lured by their voices or perhaps having just coincidentally walked by, Erakino popped her head into the room.

“Uh-oh... Did I come at a bad time?” Erakino’s cheeks twitched at the mayhem she saw in the room, and she tried to beat a quick retreat before getting dragged into anything annoying.

Unfortunately for her, Atou and Fenne were faster. They pulled her into the room, where they filled her in on the weird new problem and brainstormed to figure out a solution.



THEY had the nuns leave and restricted access to the storage room. In that messy, cramped space where Lenea’s elite had gathered, Atou and Fenne scrutinized the contents of the questionable decree, their expressions grim.

“There are multiple contradictions in the instructions given. The schedule

for meetings and the like has been altered,” Atou pointed out. “How do you manage the schedules, Fenne?”

“I left it completely to the others,” Fenne reluctantly admitted, shaking her head as she stared at the paper Atou waved in her face. “If they told me it was to be on this day, at this time, I would’ve said okay without doubting a thing. Administrative work is foreign to us Saints.”

Every level of government was busy these days because the administrative level had been purged without a replacement. Even Fenne was preoccupied with her immediate workload. The Saints weren’t equipped to run a nation. A Saint’s job was to hold ceremonies meant to placate and influence the masses, and to ward off enemies with God’s Miracle Artes in times of need.

It was a miracle that Fenne and Soalina had pulled the country as far along as they had. In that sense, it was hard to blame them for not questioning their work amid the daily chaos. Sure, that work might’ve been contradictory and intentionally crafted to breed confusion in their ranks, but they couldn’t be criticized for not realizing it.

“What about you, Erakino?” Atou asked her fellow Witch.

“Yeaaaaah, I’m a free soul, so I don’t do much...”

Erakino fell under similar circumstances to the Saints. She was a Witch and the Game Master’s vanguard unit. She wasn’t created to manage a country, nor would she be useful in that position. It would’ve been a different story if the GM had added that trait to her character sheet, but no one expected they would end up in this position.

And then there was Atou—the sole person equipped to handle empire-management—yet they had put measures in place to keep her far away from the heart of Lenea’s governance due to her history with Mynoghra.

“Okay, now for the next question,” Atou said. “Don’t you think there’s been a strange lack of interaction between everyone as of late?”

“Isn’t that just because we’ve all been so busy?” Erakino responded. “Master said the others will come to us for help if they run into trouble, anyway.”

“I thought the same thing as Erakino,” Fenne added. “I feel like others aren’t very comfortable in my presence and tend to avoid me.”

Even the contradictory documents Fenne could identify had been written identically to the real thing. The oddest thing was that the fake decrees arranged for even the problems the Saints had overlooked to be properly taken care of, improving the lives of their people and significantly increasing the Saints’ clout.

What stood out was a conscious effort to ingeniously adjust things so the people in power had as little time as possible to come together and talk. It was

almost as if the person behind the alterations wanted to prevent them from having a unified front.

“It’s obvious someone has tampered with the decrees,” Atou declared. “I’m positive King Takuto’s behind it, but...please give me some time before asking how he did it. I’m still not sure of the answer myself.”

“What’s the purpose of this, though?” Fenne asked. “I can see how it can hinder us. I wasn’t suspicious of anything until you pointed it out. Atou, you once said the King of Ruin’s objective is getting you back. Does this have something to do with that?”

“We’ve been using and abusing the GM’s power to deal with the Paladin Murder Case,” Atou said. “It would make sense he’s doing this to try and figure out how that ability works so he can come up with a countermeasure.”

“So, he’s creating chaos and trying to find countermeasures and weaknesses he can exploit,” Fenne summarized. “That’s a persuasive explanation, but is that really all there is to it?”

Fenne scoured her memories. As far as the GM’s abilities were concerned, she recalled countless occasions where they’d used it to try and resolve the Paladin Murder Case and repel Takuto Ira. They’d received various information in return, and Soalina even strongly urged the GM to come to their realm to solve the problem. Fenne opposed that plan, arguing they could move more freely if the GM kept his position concealed. Their relationship soured after that point.

That was how unreserved they had been in arguing their points and how open they’d been about everything. But all of that was done in secret with a select few individuals: Soalina, Fenne, Erakino, Atou, and occasionally, Paladin Commander Fjord. They were all trustworthy and confirmed to be themselves by the GM’s incessant checks.

Naturally, they had countermeasures in place to prevent eavesdropping, such as the Saints’ Barriers and the GM using his Authority to obstruct espionage. Even if the King of Ruin had secretly extended his reach to their land, he wouldn’t have had the means to know what they discussed. And that was exactly why Fenne doubted his objective was testing the GM’s abilities. Most of all, the GM’s Arbiter ability couldn’t be negated even if someone knew about it.

Seeing Fenne lost in thought, Atou opened her mouth to say something more and then shut it. She took this as an opportunity to put the topic on hold and gave her suggestion instead.

“Whatever the case may be, we need to strengthen security,” Atou said. “Cancel—er, halt—all your plans and get everyone together to talk. If my guess is right, then we are in a bad position—no, we’re royally screwed.”

“I agree. We need to make certain our opponent doesn’t catch on to the fact that we’ve realized what he’s doing. If he has penetrated this deep into our government, he must have a trap laid. We need to make the first move.”

They first needed to get on the same page by pooling what they knew. Three of the five key members of their government were present, with Saint Soalina and Commander Fjord unaccounted for. Fjord was in a particularly precarious position. Despite being in the closest political position to the Saints, his pride as a Paladin had him acting on his own and keeping them out of the loop. Both Fjord and the Order of Paladins were indispensable to Lenea—not playthings for the forces of evil to toy with...

Fenne and Atou’s sense of imminent danger skyrocketed to the point that they shifted into full battle mode. These women with superhuman abilities sharpened their five senses to peak level, prepared to take on whatever was coming their way. Their mounting tension was snuffed out by the third member of their group—Witch Erakino.

“S-Say...” she began in a hoarse voice, the color draining from her face.

It was important for everyone to be keenly aware of the imminent threat, but Erakino’s reaction seemed unrelated. Both the GM and Erakino had shown themselves to be weak-kneed when it came to unexpected situations, but this felt different from all the other times.

“So, um, I just thought she was, you know, busy with work and all that, but...” Her trembling voice brought a different kind of tension into the room. “Wh-Where is Soalina?”

With that question, her fear spread to the others, and Atou paled.

“Erakino!” she shouted. “Roll the dice!!”

Erakino snapped out of it and promptly shut her eyes to seek help from the Game Master.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Display the exact whereabouts of Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials.

Silence ruled for one long moment.

Result: The whereabouts of Soalina are unknown.

The worst possible result.

One look at the first teary-eyed expression Erakino had ever made told Atou and Fenne how dire the situation was. The absolutely unsolvable nature of the Paladin Murder Case now applied to Saint Soalina

“Why?!” Erakino screamed. “Wh-What the hell is going on?! Why won’t the damn system answer us?! Soalina should be unrelated to that case!”

“Game Master! Can you identify the cause of the error?! It’s all or nothing! Please question the system with all you’ve got!” Atou shouted out of desperation to solve the issue.

Sometimes throwing everything you’ve got at the wall can make something stick. Atou’s quick thinking netted them a single answer to their questions.

<!\>EXECUTION ERROR

An Event is currently in progress.

The Game Master cannot execute his Authority.

EVENT NAME

Pursue the Culprit Behind the Serial Paladin Murder Case!

The truth doesn’t always bring hope.

“An E-Event?!” Atou cried, raking a restless hand through her hair.

Now she had irrefutable evidence that the sickening, gnawing hunch she’d had all along was right. She had heard about Events from Takuto. She remembered him mentioning it when Mynoghra was forced to endure its most bitter loss yet.

...An Event was responsible for Hero Isla losing to one of the demon generals from *Brave Questers’* Demon Lord Army.

But an Event can’t be happening now! It just can’t! Atou denied with all her heart. *Or can it? That Hero can make it happen!*

“Are you going to mimic even the events that hurt us, **NAMELESS GOD?**!” Atou howled at the top of her lungs.

Atou should have known his name better than anyone, but he was a terrifying Hero whose name vanished from memory like a puff of smoke because it didn’t *exist*. He was the Holy God’s opposite—the Evil God said to have created Atou from sludge. A being seen as one and the same as the game player—in other words, as Takuto Ira.

This was the name of Mynoghra’s god and default Commander in *Eternal Nations*.

“Game Master! You’re listening, aren’t you? Summon someone who knows Soalina’s whereabouts to us! Right now!” Fenne demanded, calmly moving things along while Atou was too flustered to act.

Fenne had already grasped the nature of the GM's abilities through its constant use, so she instructed him to use it in a way that didn't directly interfere with the Event. Her clever thinking paid off in spades.

A lone Paladin appeared with a bright glow a moment later.

"Whoa?! Wh-What in Arlos's holy name just happened?!"

"You're...the Mesial Paladin we promoted just the other day, yes?" Fenne greeted. "I'll explain what's happening later. Please tell us where Saint Soalina is right now."

The Paladin was so shocked by his summoning, he fell on his butt and restlessly looked around the room. He quickly realized the gravity of the situation by the stern expression on Fenne's pale face. He squashed his confusion to answer her query.

"Uh, y-yes, ma'am! I, um, believe Saint Soalina is currently at the site of the old Cathedral." The Paladin's eyes went wide the second he told them, as if he'd just said something he shouldn't.

"Why the hell is she there?!" Erakino shrieked at him, erasing the regretful expression right off his face.

"That's because...well...she was going there to speak in secret with Commander Fjord," he said, his voice growing quieter as he spoke. It seemed he was sworn to secrecy about the matter. "I was only told the location in case anything happened. I don't know anything else."

This Mesial Paladin was probably the only person who knew anything. Soalina made him responsible for reporting to the others in an emergency.

The site of the old Cathedral was the church grounds they used before they built St. Amritate Cathedral. A cathedral in name only, the historical building was only slightly bigger than the average church and was constructed from now-decaying wood. It was long unused and too costly to dismantle, so it had been left to fall apart for years. Why would Commander Fjord and Soalina meet in a place like that?

They all knew the answer without saying it.

Evil's reach had finally come for Soalina.

"Let's head straight there... King Takuto's probably caught on to our conversation by now," Atou said. Fenne nodded and Erakino sharply inhaled. "Correction...he might've already prepared for this."

Is there any failure more shameful and despicable than this...? Atou berated herself internally. Her heart hammered in her ears, and terrible thoughts had been racing through her mind since her hunch proved true.

"Brace yourselves. You are up against the King of Ruin, Takuto Ira," she squeezed out, earning silent nods from the Saint and Witch.

They braced themselves with the knowledge they were about to face the incarnation of disaster—the apocalypse-bringer.

【EVENT】

Pursue the Culprit Behind the Knight Murders!

Location: Limoneak Castle

Suggested Level: 13-16

The Kingdom of Limonea has been fighting the Demon Lord's army for a long time. After delivering weapons to the royal castle, the protagonist gets involved in a mysterious incident there. Knights are killed every night. The kingdom will crumble at this rate! Hurry up and find the culprit to restore peace to the royal castle!

This is the event where you first encounter Flame Demon Flamin. Flamin-related quests are some of the most depressing in the Brave Questers series, and a lot of people have been traumatized by what happens in this one. It's commonly known as Childhood Traumatic Event #1.

As time passes in-game, the day will change and the knights will die, so if you want to reduce the number of casualties, you need to quickly talk to the necessary people and find Flamin. Even if you solve the event at the fastest speed, there will still be casualties, so don't even waste your time reloading.

Chapter 9: Nameless

THREE shadows raced through Lenea's sky—Sludge Witch Atou, Slurping Witch Erakino, and Veiled Saint Fenne. Worried about Saint Soalina, they rushed across the rooftops with tremendous momentum at the speed their latent physical strength and the Game Master's buffs allowed for. The people who noticed them below didn't even have the chance to point them out before they were gone with the wind.

"I'll make this as simple as possible!" Atou shouted loud enough the other two could hear her over the rush of wind. "King Takuto's Hero name is the Nameless Evil God! His ability is..." She kicked off the roof and launched herself into a jump, easily crossing the wide street. Then she took a deep breath and finished in a sonorous voice, "...because he has no name, he can be no one and everyone at the same time!"

Eternal Nations didn't have much flavor text on the Nameless Evil God. The default Commander usually only has the bare minimum of background information to better immerse the player in the world. There are more detailed Commanders you can select instead of the empire's default, such as Isla, but of all the default Commanders available, the Nameless Evil God is the most shrouded in mystery.

The one thing Atou could say for sure...was that as long as he was Mynoghra's god, he was capable of bringing unimaginable destruction to the world.

"His main ability is Perfect Imitation! In the game, he couldn't recreate whole characters, only boost his Strength to match theirs, but judging from recent events, it's safe to say there are no limitations to his ability in this world! I hesitated to bring it up because it shouldn't be possible, but now I'm certain that's what's happening!"

Atou came to that conclusion due to several factors. First of all, she remembered the short scene in all of *Eternal Nations'* vast storylines that depicted the Nameless Evil God's ability to shapeshift into his target. The second reason came from the fact that Takuto was manipulating and tampering with information to a level that could only be done by one of them in person.

And then there was the clincher: activating Events.

Takuto had started an Event that was a mechanic belonging to the RPG

forces from *Brave Questers*. Atou had no way of knowing if the “Pursue the Culprit Behind the Serial Paladin Murder Cases!” Event was actually a part of the *Brave Questers* series or not. What she did know was that there was no one left to activate Events since they had annihilated the Demon Lord and wiped out his army, putting a definite end to the RPG forces. The only logical conclusion, then, was that Takuto had morphed into someone from the Demon Lord’s Army to pull it off.

He had activated one of the Forced Events that had tormented Mynoghra and caused Isla’s death. What should have been left in the past came back to life like the dead to drag Lenea down into the pits of hell.

“What the hell?!” Erakino shouted in disbelief. “Why didn’t Master see through him, then?! It’s impossible for his Authority to fail!!”

“I told you already! It’s *Perfect Imitation*! He’s one hundred percent that person as far as the system is concerned!!” Atou explained.

No matter how much you doubted a person, Takuto’s imitation was the real thing down to its very last fiber and memory, so there was no seeing through the guise. The imitation was so perfect, it wasn’t an imitation anymore. The Evil God incapable of being known, could now imitate any kind of information to become *anyone*. The known became unknown and vice versa. His ability was like a curse that overwrote reality itself to make it true, eliminating even an inkling of suspicion.

Such was the being known as the Nameless Evil God.

“He becomes the person! That’s how he perfectly created decrees without anyone suspecting a thing! That’s how he got close to the Paladins without them noticing! That’s how...” Atou sucked in a big breath and bellowed, “he mingled with us and observed our every move!”

That revelation silenced Fenne and Erakino. Even the Game Master, who hid in a gap between dimensions existing outside of this world, observing the situation closely, was stunned by Takuto’s ridiculous ability.

The Nameless Evil God could perfectly imitate everything. Even the word “imitate” doesn’t quite describe his ability. It was more like the moment he defined himself as “something,” he became it. The ultimate subterfuge ability when put into action against allies and enemies alike.

Just like Erakino’s Slurp forcefully changed Atou’s allegiance, what defined the entity known as Takuto Ira was completely rewritten down to the last detail. Since he became that person in every way, it was impossible to suspect anything. Even more so if everyone was forced to acknowledge the pretense that the Nameless Evil God didn’t exist in the first place...for he was UNKOWN.

But...that means King Takuto himself is... Atou gnashed her teeth and put

even more strength into her gait. Sorrow warped her beautiful face and tears misted her crimson eyes.



SOALINA stood in eerie silence on the other end of the open double doors. The old cathedral's chapel stood in disrepair, the interior ransacked by thieves who'd yanked anything of value off the walls and floors, leaving broken chairs and tattered tapestries to heighten the melancholy permeating this long-forgotten place. Part of the ceiling had collapsed, and the sunlight streaming through the large hole created an ethereal sight.

Soalina basked under that light in front of the lectern used during sermons.

Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials was the only person in the chapel. Correction: she was the only *living* person. At her feet was Paladin Commander Fjord, lying dead in a pool of his blood, a gaping hole through his chest, his final expression one of rage and despair...

Someone gasped.

Soalina had been staring vacantly at Fjord's bloody corpse, but she sluggishly lifted her gaze to meet Atou and the rest.

"Ah...Erakino..." Soalina rasped.

"Soalina!" Erakino called her best friend's name. It didn't take a genius to guess something terrible had happened, and Fjord's lifeless body told them they had come under attack. "Are you okay?! Did you get hurt?!" Erakino asked at rapid-fire speed.

"Yes, I'm in one piece. However, Commander Fjord is..."

Relieved beyond belief to see her safe, Erakino dashed toward her friend, neglecting to realize her two allies were just as tense and on edge as when they'd set off to look for Soalina.

"C-Come ba—" Fenne tried to stop her.

Atou's eyes widened with surprise at Erakino's sudden move.

Everyone had been tricked...tricked for a whole moment.

Knowing something and actually being able to act on it are two different things. For all their wariness, when they saw her in person, they couldn't tell whether Soalina was a wolf in sheep's clothing or their ally.

Everything from this strangely arranged clandestine meeting to Fjord's corpse painted a vivid picture that this was not their Soalina, but...a misplaced, impossible doubt crept into their head, whispering, "What if we're wrong?" stopping them dead in their tracks.

A moment's hesitation is all it takes to decide the victor sometimes.

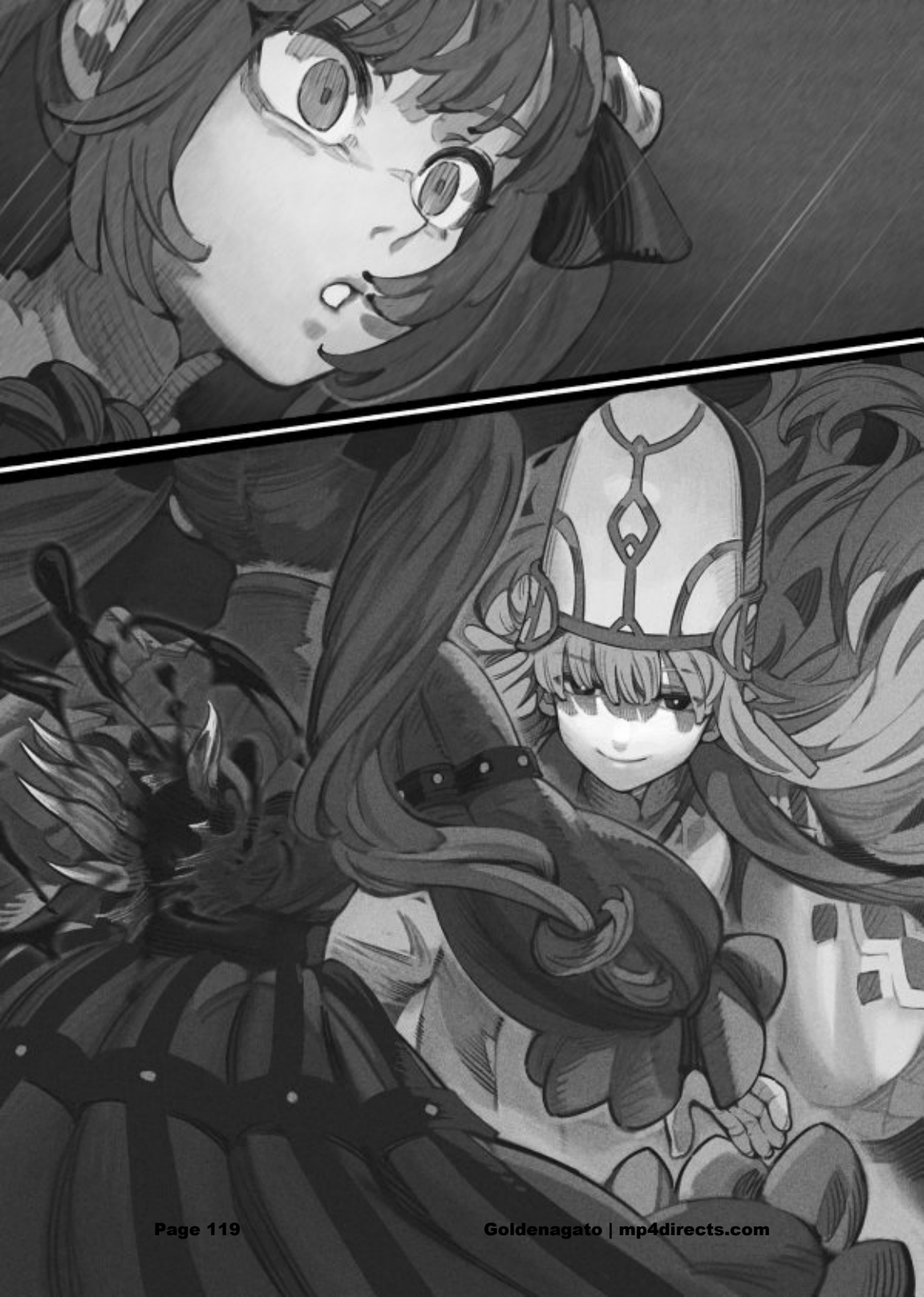
Despite knowing that a single mistake makes all the difference between life and death in a battle of the overpowered, no one stopped Erakino from running to Soalina.

“How careless of you, Erakino.”

The outcome was inevitable.

“GAAGH!!”

Erakino spat up blood as something struck her with a loud whump. As she felt a burning heat and searing pain rise up from her midriff, Erakino finally realized that Soalina had attacked her.



“Wh-Why...?” Erakino choked out.

The woman in front of her cackled. Erakino’s friend, the most irreplaceable person in her life, the one she’d give everything to save...cackled. Her best friend, Soalina, cackled.

No, it’s not her. Erakino used all her willpower to peel back the perception forced on her by an outside source, and she glowered at the enemy standing before her.

“What a noob. You really got me worried for nothing, didn’t you...?”

The words Erakino had once used to mock a certain someone had just been thrown right back at her with her best friend’s face and contempt-filled voice.

Soalina raised her blood-soaked right hand and swung it down to crack open Erakino’s skull, as if she hadn’t done enough damage to be satisfied yet...

“Not happening!!” Atou roared.

“O Lord, our maker! Grant my eyes the Miracle to exorcise evil!” Fenne chanted.

Erakino’s true allies saved her from certain death.

Soalina’s fist was sent flying upward just as it was coming down, and in that moment, a tentacle wrapped around Erakino and yanked her back to safety at lightning speed.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Fully recover Witch Erakino’s HP.

The Game Master activated his Arbiter ability to heal Erakino’s injuries.

Based on the outcome alone, everything had been reset back to how it was before Erakino charged into the chapel. Erakino, however, was still in shock as she crouched on the ground, her face paler than a sheet.

“Ghh! Koff! Koff! Haa! Koff...” She coughed and caught her breath.

“Are you all right, Erakino?!” Fenne asked after her.

“I-I’m good,” she said, her voice weak. “Saved in the nick of time...”

In the one second they’d let their guard down, their opponent went for their necks. They knew what they were getting into, and they still allowed the enemy to make the first move.

Fenne had repelled Soalina’s lethal attack, Atou retrieved Erakino, and the Game Master healed her. If any of these members had been absent, Erakino would’ve been lost for good.

The three women were speechless before Takuto Ira’s abnormal presence and surprise attack.

“Oh dear, it seems I failed. Hehehe.”

Laughter echoed through the dilapidated chapel. A cruel tone that didn't suit Soalina mocked them. That disgusting tone that both belonged to her and didn't, spilled from her delicate lips like venom. Chills scraped Erakino's spine and gripped her heart when Soalina's gaze flicked to her.

It shouldn't have been her, but something forced Erakino to recognize the *monster* before her as Soalina.

Aaah, why in the world do I keep thinking that thing is Soalina?

Aaah, why does looking at it make me think of that kindhearted girl's smile?

Why, why do I think this way when that thing's face has been blotted out by dark shadows, like it's a rift in reality itself?!

“That was reckless, even for you, Erakino!” Fenne berated. “You knew it might not be her from the start!”

“I did, but...but...!”

“I'm afraid Erakino is not the one to blame,” Atou interjected. “What you just witnessed—are currently witnessing—is the Nameless Evil God's ability at work. What you know with your head is deceived by false recognition. It's neither brainwashing nor mental manipulation. Since he fully becomes the person, there's no other way to perceive him. That's his power. I had wished with all my heart that I was wrong, however...”

Atou tried to explain that even she and Fenne would have hesitated to attack.

The Nameless God's ability was far worse than anything imaginable.

The person smiling at them wasn't Soalina—it was one hundred percent Takuto Ira. But as long as he continued to imitate Soalina, they would be forced to recognize him as her.

Using a strong will to suppress any doubts or simply bracing themselves to kill Soalina was not a solution. Doubt would flood their mind the second they were slightly rattled. Moreover, Soalina was their friend and ally through and through. And unfortunately, these women weren't capable of attacking a friend.

As foolish as it was with all these Saints and Witches on the same side, not even one had done away with their hearts.

“We can't...approach without a plan,” Fenne said wisely. “Atou, can you think of a countermeasure?”

Fenne sought Atou's opinion. She believed, as the closest person to Takuto Ira in the world, Atou was their best bet at coming up with a counter. Although...it was anyone's guess why Takuto simply watched them without doing anything, even when he had the advantage. Everyone felt chills scraping

down their spines as he intently stayed in the same spot, as if he was content just to observe them.

“Please summon Soalina here,” Atou proposed. “I’m fairly positive...the Event ended now that we’ve found the culprit. The GM’s ability should work now.” She glanced at the other Soalina to see how she would react.

Soalina—or the Nameless God wearing her skin—slowly rolled her hand out before her as if to say, “Be my guest.”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Summon Saint Soalina here.

All Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials have appeared.

Sure enough, the real Soalina appeared.

The Event had ended, and the invisible force preventing them from solving who the culprit was had been lifted, just as Atou predicted.

Now that the real Soalina was with them, it was clear that the Soalina on the pulpit was Takuto’s imitation. The horror didn’t end there, though...

Erakino and the rest felt their guts churn as, even now, they felt the same friendship toward the snickering Soalina with a blurred-out, shadow face.

The enemy was right in front of them.

The battle had already begun.

“Huh? What? Why am I...here?” Soalina asked, looking around the room in confusion.

Before they could fight, they needed to confirm several things with Soalina first. The real Soalina, that is.

“Soalina, where have you been all this time?” Fenne asked, not even explaining the situation.

“Where? I told *you* that I was going to negotiate with the Phon’kaven representative who has marched his army into our borderlands,” Soalina said, her confusion mounting.

She was supposed to be in the rocking carriage headed to Lenea’s border to resolve the territorial dispute and take care of the unusual monster problem. She thought she should rest while she could, so she was in the middle of relaxing for the first time in a long time inside the carriage... And then, before she knew it, she was facing the friends she had only just said her goodbyes to a few days prior. If that wasn’t odd enough, they were inside a rundown chapel she didn’t recognize.

Am I dreaming? she wondered, she was more baffled than panicked.

“Why in Arlos’s holy name would you do that? You should have told someone first!” Fenne yelled at her.

“Um, I’m not sure what you mean.” Soalina blinked at her fellow Saint. “I spoke with you directly about it, Saint Fenne. Don’t you remember?”

Soalina had no idea why she was being yelled at. She went through the proper procedures and received the consent of her allies.

She hadn’t done anything wrong. After all—

“Yes, I remember that conversation very well. You were especially proper about it,” the Soalina on the pulpit snickered.

—Fenne had encouraged Soalina to go.

Atou and Fenne scowled when they realized what had happened. None other than Takuto-imitating-Fenne had given Soalina a false decree and sent her far from Lenea’s capital. Then he morphed into Soalina and comfortably played the part of their friend.

“What? Is that *me*? Wh-What in the world is going on here?!” Soalina cried, her voice shaky and eyes bulging as she noticed her other self.

They had neither the time nor the composure to explain everything with the enemy standing right there, watching them with amusement. Fortunately, they had an outrageous ability that made the impossible possible.

“Game Master, please use the Arbiter ability to explain the situation to Soalina,” Atou instructed.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Saint Soalina becomes aware of what’s going on.

Everything that had transpired without her knowledge was etched into Soalina’s brain, making her aware of the King of Ruin’s horrifying schemes.

“I-Impossible...! How could this happen?!” Soalina cried, her gaze darting around the chapel as she processed the shocking information dump.

No one reproached her for being confused in their enemy’s presence. After all, Erakino and the girls had had the same reaction...

“Looks like all the main actors are here now...” Soalina—no, Takuto—whispered with glee. Everything from his delicate tone of voice to his word choice sounded identical to Soalina, thoroughly disturbing Erakino’s group.

The most disturbing thing of all, however, was that even now, he merely maintained his position on the pulpit and took no other action.

Soalina directed her gaze down to Commander Fjord, who lay face-up on the ground. More blood than any Human could lose and still live pooled around

him on the dusty floor. His graying complexion and motionless body proved he was beyond saving.

A Paladin had told Atou's group that Commander Fjord had summoned Soalina to speak in secret. Meaning he was the first to catch on to Takuto's schemes and attempted to resolve the problem alone. The result was...his brutal murder.

You can only be so reckless and expect to survive... Soalina thought, but she had neither the time nor the composure to consider the emotions that propelled Fjord into his foolish actions.

This was a crucial watershed moment. Reckless actions would lead to death and destruction.

"You were observing us this whole time, weren't you, King Takuto?" Atou asked, carefully choosing her words as she tried to discern the intentions of the shadowy creature in front of her. "Or would it be better to address you as the Nameless Evil God Takuto Ira?"

"You may address me however you please. I'm sure things are complicated for you on their side, Atou," Takuto snickered in Soalina's form, giving off a terrifying and uncanny feeling suited to the King of Ruin...and so unlike the Takuto Atou knew.

Did this eerie, gut-wrenching feeling come from the fact Atou was his enemy now? Or from something entirely different? Unsure of the reason, Atou probed for a way to defeat the enemy, waiting with the utmost caution for that one opening where they could attack him together. Rescuing Erakino was a matter of luck and nothing more. They still didn't know what cards their opponent had hidden under his sleeve...

"I appreciate the advantage it gives us, but I'm surprised you haven't tried anything even after you have all the main actors here and accounted for. Why is that, King Takuto?"

"Surprising, isn't it? You caught me a bit by surprise as well. Had you not been so quick to act, Atou, Erakino's head would have been severed from her body and left in a gory mess on the floor about now. I see your diligence comes naturally, no matter who you serve."

A slight smile tugged at the corner of Atou's lips, but she quickly discarded her pleasure at being praised by her former master.

"I am your enemy," she declared, making their relationship clear. "I still adore and respect you, but I know my place. Allow me to say this as your former confidant: please forgive me for betraying you. I must completely destroy you—the King of Ruin—here and now. For my sake, and that of my friends."

She had just declared an end to their relationship. Declared their status as

enemies. Only she knew how much emotion went into those words. The occasional sorrowful expression to cross her visage had vanished, leaving behind a warrior's mask.

“...Absolutely wonderful. Now that is the Sludge Atou I know and love. The one and only Hero I trust with all my heart,” the creature wearing Soalina's form responded with delight to what was essentially Atou's break-up speech.

Sorrow and anger welled up within Atou at his words. Would the Takuto she knew say such a thing? Would he be capable of calmly chatting with her after she told him she was going to betray and kill him?

Who—*what*—in the world was the entity standing in front of her?

Contrary to the confusion haunting Atou to the core, Takuto happily clapped his hands, his emotions showing nothing but sheer delight on this cold day.



Nameless Evil God

???

<Evil>

<Hero>

<Perfect Imitation>

Empty...

AS far as horrible situations go, this was the worst possible scenario.

Sludge Atou was the Hero Takuto used most in *Eternal Nations*. She had watched over him from up close and afar, having the closest look at him as he commanded their armies and lived out his life in Japan. She knew his personality as well as her own, so she understood that despite being four against one, *they* were doomed—not Takuto.

...There were two situations in which Takuto always overflowed with confidence.

The first was when he felt unthreatened and let down his guard toward what he felt couldn't hurt him even if they tried. He was the most playful at these times, so he either cut corners or was just fooling around to enjoy himself.

If he was in *this* state—Lenea stood a chance. Atou could take advantage of this carefree opening and thrust her tentacle through his heart for the second time.

The second situation where he showed this kind of confidence was...when he already had everything in the bag.

In this scenario, where no matter what happened, the outcome would be the same, he often showed off and enjoyed playing with his opponent. And Lenea was facing this second, more deadly version of Takuto.

But someone didn't understand the dire circumstances and let her cockiness flag fly high.

"Ha! You're just pretending to be cool as a cucumber because you can't do squat. Everything was riding on that last-ditch surprise attack of yours, wasn't it? Pft, too bad, so sad, you failed to kill lil' old me~♪!" Erakino taunted him.

The moment she confirmed her dear friend was safe, she got back her punk and used it to taunt and mock Takuto. She had some reservations about insulting someone who looked, acted, and sounded like Soalina, but now she had the real one with her. Erakino felt her confidence skyrocket with the real Soalina standing in battle stance beside her, bracing to protect the Witch from their enemy.

"....."

"Tch. Giving me the silent treatment, are you?" Erakino clicked her tongue. "Oh! That reminds me, you said your whole objective here is to take Atou back, right? Did you mean that?"

"You aren't wrong. I do want to get Atou back. She is very dear to me." Takuto had been observing Erakino like he would a curious new plaything, but hearing Atou's name made him finally react to Erakino, as if it were an afterthought.

"Gyahahahaha! I knew it! You're soooo obvious! Too bad, sucker~♪!"

Atouy is one hundred percent one of us thanks to your girl Erakino here and her super awesome Slurp ability!”

Takuto fidgeted slightly at Erakino’s taunting. He hadn’t reacted to a single thing thus far—it was as if Erakino was lobbing her mockery into an endless, dark abyss. So seeing that reactionless creature make any kind of gesture, even if it was a contemplative one, came across to Erakino as her finally getting under his skin.

“Shall I spell out what that means for you?” she sneered, latching on to the subject she thought bothered him. “Even the System counts Atouy as a bona fide member of our TRPG forces~♪! Her affiliation and alignment weren’t temporarily changed by something as basic as Brainwashing. She’s been *completely* reassigned to us!! Thaaaaaat’s whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy...”

Indeed, Erakino’s Slurp didn’t just Brainwash its target, but changed the faction they belonged to—altering them at their core. As the twenty-second character the Game Master had created after much trial and error, he finally added the ability to reassign enemies to their faction.

It should be impossible for a Game Master to abuse his Authority and steal the rights to a character from an entirely different game. Doing so greatly deviated from the typical discretion granted to a TRPG’s game master. He got around this by giving the ability to a character, gimping the system to think it was one character using a legitimate ability against another. This workaround allowed him to even use that broken skill on characters from an entirely different game genre.

The GM had developed his method of securing certain victory by exploiting gaps in this world’s rules.

Once the outcome was decided, the TRPG system kicked in, making it impossible to overturn the result. In other words, the existence known as Sludge Atou had been stripped from Mynoghra and put into a position where they could never get her back again. It was impossible to recover her through normal means.

That was an irrefutable fact.

“That’s why...! You won’t get what you want no matter how hard you tryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

Erakino rolls 1d100=33 for Ranged Attack

Outcome: Success

Erakino unleashed a barrage of slashing wind blades.

“...I entomb ye now in a blooming burial.”

Takuto intercepted the attack that came barreling down on him, destroying everything in its path, with a flick of Soalina's Holy Staff. The wind blades and wave of flames collided, creating a destructive fire vortex in the center of the chapel. The old cathedral's weak walls burst off their foundation, reducing the chapel to true ruins and expanding their battlefield to include the outside grounds.

"Bahahaha! I can't believe you're actually trying to resist! It looks like you can't do anything without borrowing somebody else's power first, you weakling!" Erakino cackled with glee.

GM: Message
Exercising Game Master Authority.
Revive High Paladin Fjord.

"Aaaaaaaaall your little scheming in the background was absolutely pointless!!" she goaded, eyes sparkling with cruel delight.

GM: Message
Exercising Game Master Authority.
High Paladin Fjord becomes aware of what's going on.

"See, even our Chiefy you went to such lengths to kill is right as rain now! Everything you did was pointless! Utterly worthless! Face the facts, you effin' shut-in: you're absolutely powerless!"

Fjord jumped up from the puddle of blood on the floor and cautiously distanced himself from Takuto. He glanced between the two Soalinas for a moment before quickly retreating from the battlefield. One of Arlos's Paladins would never flee from evil. After signaling Erakino and the others, Fjord departed to summon the rest of the Order, sensing he could do little to help them alone.

The situation changed by the second, morphing into something disadvantageous for Takuto. In fact, with the GM's last move, all his gains had been rendered null. Even with such meticulous groundwork laid to terminate Fjord, the GM undid it all at his own discretion. He could do the same for the murdered Paladins too. The GM would revive them all now that the Event wasn't interfering with his ability.

No matter what ingenious strategies or tricks Takuto had up his sleeve... everything would be nullified by the Game Master, who decided the outcomes.

"You have quite the foul mouth on you. It saddens me to hear you speak like a street urchin... I would watch your tongue if I was you, Erakino.

Everything you say and do will become your Master's onus."

Soalina—no, Takuto Ira—responded with great pleasure to Erakino's best attempt at trolling. What in the world could be going through this evil creature's twisted mind that he seemed to bask in her insults, taunting, and shouting? It was as if she was feeding him exactly what he wanted to hear.

Revulsion spread through Erakino at how totally incomprehensible he was, agitating her further.

"You're a creep! An effin' creep!!" she shouted, preparing to launch another attack on him.

Fake Soalina prepared to intercept the next attack with the same Blooming Burials skill, but...

"Die!" Erakino hissed. "I'll kill you for good this time! I don't know what you were trying to accomplish, but a nobody like you can't do nothing before Master's uber powers!"

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

All Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials are temporarily restrained.

"Ah!"

"Oh my, how fun..."

This time Takuto was prevented from even being able to resist. By order of the GM, Soalina was restricted from moving. This also applied to the real Soalina, but it only restrained her and didn't cause physical harm. As both the real and the fake Soalina reacted to the sudden restraint, Takuto's Soalina seemed as calm and confident as ever.

"You've put me in a bit of a bind here. Would you mind *pausing* a moment?" he requested in Soalina's dulcet tone.

"HUUUUUH?! Like hell we will!!"

All they had to do was attack him until he died. Taking Erakino's onslaught of attacks while imitating a defenseless Soalina would have to hurt him. Even if he managed to withstand the attacks, that *thing* wearing Soalina's skin would still be restrained by the Game Master's ability.

They could destroy him again and again and again. Annihilating him until not even a flake of skin or speck of dust was left behind, so he could never revive again.

If only...

"Fair point. Let me put it in a way you will understand then..." Takuto laughed like this was the beginning of a joke only he knew. And then, he

dropped a bombshell on them. “Player Takuto Ira calls for the system to pause this game session.”

System Message

**A player has called for the game session to pause.
Suspending all participants’ abilities until the problem is resolved.**

Shock coursed through them all. Even Atou and Fenne, who were closely observing Takuto and how the situation unfolded with Erakino in the lead, couldn’t react fast enough. They scowled as they realized their mistake.

But they only lingered on their failure for a moment. They quickly changed gears and confirmed each other’s status. Seeing as the real Soalina’s restraints had come undone, they determined something had gone wrong. Then they turned to see what Takuto was doing...

“He’s gone?!”

“Wh-Where did the King of Ruin go?!”

In the spot where the creature of their nightmares should have been, stood an empty, silent space that seemed to insist there was never anyone there in the first place.

“What the hell?! Did that chicken run away?!” Erakino bellowed.

She could sense the Game Master’s confusion and frantically tried to grasp the situation for him. Just as she’d concluded that their opponent chose to retreat from this disadvantageous situation...

“No! He’s coming!!”

Atou’s warning echoed through the ruined cathedral.

In perfect timing with her alert, countless tentacles burst through the remaining ceiling, raining down on them like blades.

Chapter 10: Introductions

TENTACLES burst through the ceiling, snaking into the church and attacking from various trajectories, each with a mind of its own. Sludge Atou noticed the tentacles first. She prepared to intercept the attack from the ground, knowing that the consortium of deadly feelers was exactly like her own.

“Everyone, behind me! Now!” she shouted. “Damn feelers! I’ll show you who’s superior!!”

Tentacles erupted from Atou’s back and whipped around to protect her comrades. The two sets of tentacles clashed, producing an eerie metallic clang that hardly sounded like it came from something organic. The shockwaves produced by the impact destroyed what little remained of the chapel.

The three women being protected by Atou leaped into action as well.

Fenne repelled and severed dozens of tentacles with an invisible shockwave emanating from her eyes. Soalina incinerated the tentacles flopping around on the ground after Fenne’s attack. Meanwhile, Erakino and the Game Master tried to get a grasp of the bizarre situation so they could handle it better.

“Master! Can’t we do something?!” Erakino shouted. “Damn it! You’ve gotta be effin’ kidding me!!!”

“What’s going on, Erakino?” Soalina asked. “Why isn’t the Game Master’s ability working?!”

From the way Erakino kept swearing, the GM’s powers seemed completely sealed. That had to have something to do with the declaration Takuto Ira made before he vanished.

Erakino had long since filled Soalina in on the details about the GM’s powers and how they possessed abilities from a type of pastime called a tabletop role-playing game. The only way to figure out what was happening was to ask the pair about it, but...

“He called for a session pause! That little shithead!” Erakino cursed. “He’s come to flip the script on its head, that prick! TRPGs proceed through dialogue and rolling the dice! The Players have as much right to stop the session as the GM!”

Takuto’s counterattack was calling for “Pause this Game.” As Erakino explained to Soalina, discussions between participants are an integral part of a tabletop RPG. So, when one player asks to pause the game, all participants must

temporarily stop playing and hear them out. Like everything else, the system governing this world reproduced that part of the game, too.

In other words, it was possible to temporarily restrict the lawless, absolute power exercised by the Game Master. But this move was a double-edged sword.

“But... BAHHAHAHA!” Erakino buckled over laughing. “What a mooooooooooron! You’re so done now that you’ve used that, noob!” She paused for effect, and then declared, “Slurping Witch Erakino asks on behalf of the Game Master: state a valid reason for pausing the session!”

The Game Master and Erakino promptly discovered and pointed out the hole in Takuto’s strategy.

Pausing the session is possible but needs a valid reason. Pausing without reason is cause for a penalty. In this case, Takuto Ira would be penalized. No matter how much he altered his existence with his powers as the Nameless Evil God, he made this request from the Player’s dimension, not the game board. The system wouldn’t mistake who should be penalized.

“Wowie-wow, here I thought you were gonna do something big with how cocky you’ve been, and *this* is it~♪? I mean, sure, I’ll give credit where credit is due. You did temporarily lock down the Game Master’s Authority. But as the good ol’ rulebook says, pausing the session without a valid reason is prohibited! Nobody’s allowed to interfere with a good game! You’re finished, loser~♪!”

The likely penalty would be compulsory expulsion from the game.

The loss wouldn’t be placed on the King of Ruin, who’d established an empire of evil forces in this world, but upon Takuto Ira, a human who had already died once and been given a second chance at life in this world. It was anyone’s guess what would happen if he was forced out of the game. He would lose everything and never be able to get it back again—that much was clear.

“C’mon! C’mon! What’s it gonna be? How are ya gonna talk your way outta this one? Luck ain’t on your side. Sucks to be you, doesn’t it, lil’ powerless Takuto IRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” Erakino jeered, her voice filled with victorious elation.

Is this the end of the road? Atou wondered, noticing something had changed when the tentacles abruptly stopped attacking. A voice suddenly came from directly behind her, declaring in an eerily familiar voice:

“My introduction.”

The four women spun around and jumped back. But...they cringed when they saw who was behind them.

None other than Sludge Atou silently loomed there, tentacles swaying

behind her. Or rather, it was Takuto Ira's imitation of her, with the face fully blotted out by darkness.

Erakino sensed something was amiss. The feeling of her abilities being limited hadn't changed since his declaration. The session was still paused.

"Erakino," Takuto said, speaking with Atou's voice and persona. "You might not know this, but the Elemental Ward 4th Edition you and the Game Master brought into this world has a unique feature to its gameplay."

"What?!"

From the way this nasty creature wearing Atou's skin worded it, he clearly had just cause to keep the session paused. But what stumped Erakino more than anything else was that...he spoke the name of the rulebook—which only Erakino and her Master knew of—that dictated the mechanics of their game.

"This specific edition is unique because it dedicates pages upon pages specifically to player ethics. For example, it goes into great detail about how to enjoy playing with others, what you shouldn't do to other players...and how you should *greet* them." The shadowy face seemed to smile there.

I know that. I know that better than anyone! Erakino screamed internally.

Erakino had been born from the game mechanics laid out in that rulebook. Over twenty-one failed versions of her character sheet had been scrapped from this world. After finally receiving life as a finished product, she thought that she and her master had overcome all odds and finally threw themselves into a battle for the world.

Who leaked the title? How did it get out?

As Erakino became absorbed in asking herself questions without answers, Takuto continued his monologue.

"This particular edition is controversial because people think it's sanctimonious. I'm personally fond of it." The shadow's smile stretched wider.

Yes, the rulebook gave him just cause to pause the game.

"I mean, this rulebook starts off in big, bold print with, 'You can't start the session until all the participants finish introducing themselves.' Wonderful, isn't it?"

This was the only way to stop the session and halt the Game Master's invincible powers.

"Introducing yourself is very important," Takuto said in Atou's know-it-all tone. "Even a preschooler knows that." He wiggled a finger at them the way Atou would.

It was the most ridiculous method at that.

Erakino gnawed at her bottom lip as she tried to come up with a countermeasure. She couldn't think of a greater bombshell reveal than him

figuring out what rulebook governed them. Their TRPG abilities were entirely based on that rulebook.

Tabletop role-playing games are characterized by their rulebooks and are known for their strict adherence to the settings, lore, rules, and mechanics laid out in them.

The rulebook was their greatest weapon, and that was why it was their most confidential secret. Having their secret exposed was a lethal blow, as proven by the fact something as retarded as an “Introduction” had completely turned the odds against them.

“Oh dear, why do you look so shocked, Erakino? Ooh, now I see. Are you distressed about how *I* could possibly know the exact name of your game?”

A perfect guess.

Erakino needed to gather as much information as possible while her opponent was happily prattling on and on. She had no idea how much he knew, but she had to acknowledge he had an overwhelming advantage on the information front.

He was toying with them all along.

“You messed up the moment you placed monsters on the continental border. It certainly works wonders to prevent invasions from the Dark Continent, but it was like you were just begging me to guess what game you’re from, you know? Besides...this particular game has online sessions that I had the pleasure of playing myself. Isn’t it only obvious that I would figure it out? Wouldn’t you agree...Sludge Atou?” The shadowy figure imitating Atou giggled as it sought agreement from the real Atou.

“You dare imitate me next?!” she thundered, furious with what he said. “Your impudence knows no bounds!!”

“You are the most talented combatant of the lot, Atou. It only makes sense for me to choose you... Oh, should I have asked for your permission first?” He tilted his—her—head.

He was provoking her.

They might’ve become enemies, but Atou had a hard time believing Takuto would use this tactic against her, which inflated her concerns and caused her to panic.

This *thing* was obviously not the Takuto she knew.

“No need! I’m happy to allow my King Takuto to do it! As long as it’s *my* King Takuto!!”

“Oh my, that’s quite the suggestive word choice. Something on your mind, me?”

Yes, there very much was something on her mind. It had plagued her

waking thoughts since she learned that Takuto had the powers belonging to the Nameless Evil God. Ever since she realized he possessed that ability from the start of his time in this world and that she'd only forgotten about the possibility.

When it came down to it, what scared her more than anything was—

“Could it be that you believe Takuto Ira never existed from the start? That he was merely a skin the Nameless Evil God was wearing to have some fun?”

Takuto Ira—no, the shadow being—hit her with the words she didn't want to hear. With the reality she didn't want to face.

Something broke inside Atou.

Her body trembled, and she felt her knees buckling beneath her.

Fenne and Soalina tried to close the distance with her out of concern, but...

“...?! Crap!”

Takuto Ira wasn't kind or weak enough to let such an opportune moment pass by.

“Ahaha! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHA! You're losing your touch!”

“Damn it! Damn you!!”

The consortium of tentacles homed in on Atou again. She swiftly intercepted them, but her vehemence was squashed by the mental blow she'd been dealt, making it difficult to deflect and counter the attacks as she had before.

Fenne and Soalina intercepted the onslaught with their Miracle Artes as well, but it was nigh impossible to parry and dodge the full-strength strikes unleashed by Takuto in Atou's form, since she was the strongest combatant.

Lenea's defeat was set in stone if they didn't act fast.

The myriad of tentacles out for blood would eventually destroy them all.

As the three combatants bought her time, Erakino prepared to bet it all.

“Master! Introduce yourself! Say your name and rip this cocky, imposter shut-in off his high horse and smack him dead!!” Erakino screamed.

If a self-introduction was all it took, then they should just introduce themselves. Of course, if the other Player refused to return the greeting, they could penalize him for obstructing the session's progress.

There were a handful of ways for the Game Master to project his voice into the game world. The fastest was speaking through Erakino, or he could use his GM Authority to speak directly to this location. All that was left was for the GM—who seemed to be hesitating for whatever reason—to give his name and self-introduction.

He just needed to man up and do it.

“Oh, right, I forgot to tell you,” Takuto-imitating-Atou casually addressed them like they were having small talk at a café, rather than him trying to impale

them at lightning speed with a legion of wildly whipping tentacles. “*Brave Questers* has a special kind of magik that lets you curse a person to death using their true name. Isn’t that nice?”

The Game Master’s hesitance stemmed from the instinctual fear of death. It bound him, staying his hand.

Erakino gasped. She shot Takuto a glare harboring all her hatred for him, but from beginning to end, he cackled like he was having a mighty good time.

Yet again, they had lost to him on the information front.

A lethal loss... Their very lives literally hung in the balance based on who had more knowledge.

“Y-You’re bluffing!” Erakino challenged in a high-pitched shout.

They had already experienced him using Events from *Brave Questers* to interfere with their abilities. This meant that Takuto Ira could imitate any character capable of activating Events from an RPG. So it wasn’t too far-fetched for him to be capable of using some mysterious curse from *Brave Questers*. And yet, something about how he told them about it now seemed suspicious.

They had been tricked by the changeling-like King of Ruin’s bluffs far too many times. He couldn’t do anything himself, so he borrowed the strength of others and then got into their heads with his lies.

The jig was up.

I’m sure he’s just using his loner craftiness to get into our heads and seal off Master’s abilities, Erakino concluded.

“D-Don’t do it!” Fenne cautioned.

“Fenny! Why not?! Liar’s just gonna lie!”

“It’s over for us if that leads to the Game Master’s defeat...” Fenne pointed out. “We should prioritize him and his ability to resurrect the dead!”

Few are capable of facing invisible horrors. Even a Saint occasionally makes pessimistic decisions.

Erakino sucked her lip in between her teeth and bit down. She was torn. She felt like Fenne was being a coward, but she also agreed with her. Even Erakino understood that a deadly risk accompanied revealing the GM’s name in the heat of the moment.

“Atouy! Know anything?!” Erakino looked to Atou for help.

“I’m sorry, I don’t!” Atou replied. “I-I’m nothing more than a character from *Eternal Nations*. Other games are outside my area of expertise. I know a couple of the characters we fought to some degree, but not in great detail...”

Erakino clicked her tongue. She knew even less about *Brave Questers* than Atou did. Atou had mentioned the game to her before, but the detailed settings, system, game mechanics, and the like, were outside her realm of knowledge.

They had no way of knowing if the game had a spell capable of killing someone just by learning their true name.

“MASTER!!” Erakino begged the GM for the answer.

Unfortunately for them...

“Do you know about *Brave Questers*?” Imitation Atou asked. “I can’t imagine your Master would. He’s nothing more than an ordinary man with little knowledge of games—he was just randomly picked by the dice. Or at least that’s what I heard... Yes, I was told directly all about it.”

The GM had absolutely no idea about that, either.

“THAT TIME!” Fenne wailed. “You were already among us...!”

What time exactly was Fenne referring to? What conversation had Takuto Ira taken part in? Only the man in question could know for sure, and the knowledge was consigned to oblivion unless he deigned to tell them.

The one truth they could glean from that shadowy creature’s awfully satisfied grin was that they had handed over a great deal of information about themselves without ever knowing it.

And with it, the dominoes began to fall one by one.

“That’s right, Veiled Saint Fenne. You foolish, foolish woman who teamed up with a Witch for the sake of your own happiness,” he taunted.

“How dare— AAAAAGH!”

“Fenne!”

Did she lose concentration in her moment of unbridled rage? Or did her nerves fray during the unending dance of offense and defense?

Either way, Fenne fell first.

A tentacle whipped her side, sending her flying into one of the still-standing walls. Seeing as she’d staggered in place, the blow wasn’t fatal, but her pristine saintly armor rapidly turned red. She wouldn’t be rejoining the fray any time soon.

“You won’t be able to keep up with us with that mutilated body you hide under the veil. Please stay there and enjoy the show from the sidelines,” Takuto ordered, seemingly losing interest in her enough not to finish her off. He shifted his gaze back to Erakino. “Oh, right! The most important thing completely slipped my mind. Forgive my tardiness.”

He clapped his hands together as if he had just remembered something and used Atou’s superhuman speed to zip over to the pulpit.

“AAAaaaaa...ngh...ah-ah-ah...”

The four women gasped.

It happened all so suddenly.

The outline of Takuto in Atou’s form warped for a fraction of a second

before inky darkness burst into existence. As if rejected by the world itself, the darkness seemed to rip open the fabric of time and space itself to be there. Deep within that inkiness was an ocean of black darker than the darkest night. It was impossible to conclude that what they were looking at was a living, breathing being, but with the slightest movement, it made its existence known to the world.

“Agggh...oof...koff...coff...Nnn!”

It held a hand to its throat and let out the most unbearable noises. It almost seemed like it was trying to speak for the first time. The sound of it clearing its throat and trying to tune its voice to the right frequency was undeniably the work of an evil god about to make its mark on the world.

After what felt like a dreadfully long time, it seemed content with the result...

“Hello. My name is Takuto Ira. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I look forward to *playing* with you.”

With a voice that instilled fear in all who heard it, the King of Ruin introduced himself, his body a shadowy blur of darkness.

Elemental Ward Rulebook

Prologue: Welcome to the World of Elemental Ward!

Thank you for visiting this wonderful collaborative space! We want to tell you about several key features before you start.

Communication between participants is the most important part of a tabletop RPG. Simply put, it's crucial that you care about others and do your best to create a fantastic gameplay experience for everyone involved. Please understand that your session will always end in failure if you forget to respect others.

You might be wondering, "Then what must I do to get the best experience out of the game?" It might be hard at first, but introducing yourself is integral to good communication, and you must not start your game session until everyone has introduced themselves.

If you've already started the session, immediately call for a pause and exchange greetings. You are prohibited from continuing the session until everyone finishes their introduction.

Now then, get introducing yourselves and have a blast together!

THE King of Ruin had manifested in the Holy God's Divine Nation of Lenea.

The Saints and even the Witches were frightened to their core by the nauseating true darkness put on full display before them. The pressure emanating from him in imitation form was incomparable to the presence crushing them now.

Atou had witnessed Takuto in this form once before, and she had been his loyal subordinate and confidant then. The shadowy being looming before her emitted an imposing pressure, leading her to believe this was the King of Ruin's true form.

Was Takuto Ira, clearly directing his dark intentions toward them now, always such a terrifying being?

No one could stop themselves from trembling at the presence before them.

"All right...it's about that time, isn't it?" Takuto crooned in an inhuman, spine-chilling voice.

A cadence of heavy footfalls arrived at the former site of the mostly destroyed cathedral as if lured there by his words.

"Saint Fenne!" someone called.

"Commander Fjord!" Fenne responded.

Paladin Commander Fjord, who the Game Master had revived while his powers were still in effect, had arrived with an army in tow. He must've filled them in on the most important details, for the elite unit of Paladins were fully armored and carried themselves like men prepared to die for their just cause.

"I've gathered as many Paladins as possible," Fjord said. "I've also ordered the soldiers to evacuate the nearby citizens. We are prepared to save the world from disarray with the knowledge that this might be our final resting place."

"Fjord..."

None among them feared death. And not just because they could rely on the GM to revive them. Most Paladins were unaware of his ability in the first place, and even if they knew about it, there was something even more important than their own lives. Namely, the King of Ruin responsible for slaughtering many of their comrades and all the innocent lives that hung in the balance with his continued existence.

The holy warriors were dead set on eradicating Takuto Ira, no matter the cost. It's a pity that the unbridled wickedness of the being known as Takuto Ira trampled their resolve like a weed in the middle of a busy road.

"Then please exterminate that Witch first, Commander Fjord," Soalina commanded from the pulpit before anyone realized she had moved there.

"Damn it! Back to your old tricks!"

Was it Erakino or Atou who'd cursed?

Once again, Takuto disguised himself as Soalina and began to toy with the Order of Paladins as if he'd found the next way to amuse himself.

"Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials..."

"Wh-What's going on here?"

"There are two Saint Soalinas?!"

"Could one of them be a fake?!"

"But I can't tell which!"

"How do we proceed then...?"

Confused voices rose from the Paladins. Only a select few among them could guess what was going on from what they had been told beforehand. The majority couldn't comprehend the strange phenomenon they were witnessing, leaving them flustered by the presence of two very real Soalinas. With the GM's ability sealed, there was no way to immediately bring them up to speed.

Yet one confident voice sliced through the confusion.

"You're wasting your time, King of Ruin," Soalina said. "The easiest way to deal with an imitation is for the real person to overpower the fake. Even if that results in my untimely end, I'm content if it keeps the next generation alive."

One of the two Saint Soalinas declared she would sacrifice her own life to end the chaos. Was she just being reckless? Or was this the will of a holy Saint? Regardless, her strategy was the best tactic to employ in this situation.

"But then you might die, Soali!" Erakino cried out, horrified by the prospect.

No one could remain calm if their friend were suggesting they throw away their own life...especially if that was the first friend they ever made.

However, contrary to Erakino's flustered state over how to divert her friend away from something she had already set her mind to, Atou saw a spark of hope in Soalina's suggestion.

"No, you're looking at it all wrong, Erakino," Atou pointed out. "Have you already forgotten that we can bring back even the dead by using your Master's true power? Put simply, if we can defeat the King of Ruin and put an end to this Pause business, then we will be victorious on all fronts!"

Even if it took all sorts of sacrifices along the way, they would win in the end.

Erakino sucked in a sharp breath. Atou was...planning to destroy Soalina along with Takuto Ira. She had to be grieving for the master she loved and adored. She of course had a million regrets and lingering attachment. This wasn't the ending she wanted—she longed for the day she could peacefully return to Mynoghra.

But that was a dream that would never come true.

Atou had been completely absorbed into the TRPG forces, and her return to Mynoghra was rendered impossible because there was no way to undo what had already been done. Moreover, she'd already lost the Takuto Ira she knew. The question he'd posed shattered her heart into a million pieces, vaporizing her ability to think calmly.

The one sure thing was that, in this moment, she'd finally come to terms with how to prioritize her adoration for her former master and her desire to ensure her new friends' safety and victory...

And so, the battle between the two Soalinas commenced.

"O Lord, our maker! Grant my hands the holy flames to purge evil!" both chanted in unison.



THE clash of holy flames sent forth by the Saints left no room for anyone else to get involved. The holy blaze consumed the church and spread to the surrounding buildings. Everyone incapable of keeping up with this high-level battle, such as the Under Paladins, dashed off to contain the fire.

Takuto Ira didn't change forms. No, he was being kept in check by Soalina's do-or-die barrage of unrelenting attacks. With no leeway, he was forced to concentrate solely on dodging her determined onslaught.

The only difference between the two Soalinas was...the amount of heart they put into the battle. That alone had become the key element to deciding the victor, and that alone was the only reason Takuto couldn't beat Soalina in a one-on-one match.

That alone was the weakness behind Takuto's ability to imitate everything with a sneer.

...After a long clash of fake vs original, a certain scene played out for the second time.

Soalina's Holy Staff plunged through Takuto's abdomen, consuming him in a pillar of ceaseless flames.

"Yes! I did it! I'm the one who slayed Takuto Ira! The King of Ruin! Me!"

Soalina stood victorious. The real Soalina, that is. There was nothing fake about her, nor did the fake have the desire to overturn the result.

An imitation can never perform as well as the original in extreme conditions.

Hellfire was about to consign Takuto Ira to oblivion for the second time.

"No living being can survive the Blooming Burial Flames!" Soalina

exclaimed, her voice elated with success. “Not even me, the caster! You have met your end once and for all, King of Ruin!”

Witnessing that scene...made Atou believe everything was over. She understood that her master had been defeated. The moment Atou fell prey to Slurp, Takuto suffered an irreversible setback. As much as she hated to admit it, Atou and her master’s second chance at life had come to a pitiful end here.

How she wished she could have been the one to put an end to him with her own hands.

She wanted to settle things with the Takuto she knew, not the Nameless Evil God. Now, even that possibility had been stripped from her. And so, Atou wept, dedicating her thoughts solely to apologizing to the boy she’d failed.

...Sludge Atou’s biggest mistake in this moment was letting her judgment get clouded by none other than Takuto. He had riled her up until she lost the ability to think straight. That’s why she misread the situation. That’s why it took her much longer than usual to realize the most important and basic fact...

Takuto Ira had survived these very same circumstances once before.

“Kihehe!”

Misanthropic laughter rose from the shadowy figure caught in the center of the raging cone of hellfire.

“Kiheheha! Kuhehehe! HYAHahAHaHA!”

The vertical flowing flames suddenly flicked inward. Similar to the effect seen when watching a movie in rewind, the flames converged in one spot, morphing into a single mass with a mind of its own.

Eventually a man formed from the flames. A...strange-looking man.

“Mm!” He stretched his arms high over his head and cracked his neck. “Damn, that’s refreshing. I’m a free man again, after only the evil god knows how long!” he cackled.

“It can’t be...you’re...FLAMIN?!” Atou cried out in horror, the only person who knew what they were looking at.

She hadn’t fought him herself, but she had heard what he looked like enough to be able to identify him now. His sickly thin body, shirtless, shabby attire, the eerie gleam in his dead eyes, and the unceasing flames encasing him from head to toe highlighted his abnormality.

Yes, all of that defined none other than Flame Demon Flamin, one of the Four Generals of the Demon Lord’s Army that had tormented Mynoghra and stole one of their dearest from them.

“Oooh, hot damn, totally forgot about the pesky flies still buzzing ’round

the place,” Flamin said when he noticed the Paladins staring at him as he enjoyed a good stretch. “Well, I was the one who lured ’em here... Time to reduce the population, eh? Shoo fly, shoo.” He made a swatting motion toward them with his hand. Hundreds of fireballs formed around him and launched toward the Paladins with an oddly lyrical sound that belied the lethal punch they packed.

None of his enemies realized Flamin had just launched one of his AOE fire spells at them. All they could tell was that a good number of Paladins had sustained damage and lost their lives to a single attack.

“ATOU! What in the blue blazes did your master imitate this time?!” Fenne bellowed.

“One of *Brave Questers* Four Generals of the Demon Lord’s Army!” Atou shouted back. “He’s a flame demon! Don’t tell me he used Absorb?! Shoot! That’s how he survived the attack!!”

How did Takuto come back from the damage he had sustained from the surprise attack in Dragontan?

This was the answer to that riddle.

Flamin is a flame demon with complete fire mastery. In *Brave Questers*, he can absorb all damage from fire spells and use it to recover his HP.

Takuto had transformed into Flamin at the last second and healed the fatal damage to his heart with the cone of flames enveloping his whole body.

Surprised gazes converged on Flamin. He pulled a face and clicked his tongue with disgust over their needling stares.

“Don’t ya have anythin’ better to do than stare at me like a buncha sheeple? Ya make me sick. Just die— Aah!” Takuto-Flamin put a hand to his head. “...Hmm, I see. I’m so friggen strong, my personality becomes dominant, eh? Hot damn, I come with a lotta baggage.”

Seemingly having gotten control of the situation, a cruel smile brimming with hatred and greed stretched across his skeletal face. He opened his arms wide and announced, “Addressing all the stupid ladies with flowers for brains who don’t understand a friggen about my awesome plan! Here’s a question for ya’ll stuck with a dumb look on your ugly mugs!”

Flamin—Takuto Ira—was presenting them with a challenge.

“What am I about to do, hmm? Since you’re too dumb to think for yourselves, here’s a little hint: it’s got something to do with a special skill used by *Brave Questers*’ Demon Lord Army! Tick-tock, tick tock!”

Atou racked her brain for the answer.

An Event...didn’t fit the situation. There couldn’t be too many Events that triggered during a battle. Besides, Events were designed to be completed, ending

in the Demon Lord Army's defeat. So Takuto had no reason to activate an Event now.

The real Flamin had triggered his Event simply to screw Mynoghra over and take them down with him. It ended with his death and the birth of a new Witch with two sets of Hero traits, so obviously Takuto wouldn't choose that path.

Even the Event he had used on them ended with them exposing the culprit behind the Paladin Murder Case and entering battle.

No, his plan didn't include an Event.

"Well, I guess I asked too much of ya ladies. You ain't got nothing but air in yer heads. You're so damn absorbed in what's in front of you, ya don't see the big picture."

What other cards does he have to play? How else can he overturn this situation to defeat this many Saints, Witches, and an entire Order of Paladins? Atou wondered, her mind not coming up with a good answer.

"I had a speck of hope ya'd at least be able to guess at it with all those worthless joke-of-a-council meetings ya held, but looks like you were just playing pretend, eh?" he continued his taunting. "Here's hoping you get some brains in the next life, if there is such a thing."

Atou was the only one who made a move. Her years of experience and instinct as an elite unit of darkness told her she couldn't let Takuto seize the initiative, driving her to attack.

Her action succeeded. She was faster.

Flamin might've been one of the Demon Lord's generals, but he was a mage-class character with an emphasis on offensive spells. In terms of speed, he had no way of besting a close-combat character. If both took action simultaneously, Atou would always come out on top. Furthermore, Atou's current combat abilities and skills easily surpassed Flamin's. The fight should've ended in a matter of seconds.

"Without much ado..."

The moment her tentacles were about to smash Flamin's face, his skeletal frame warped and transformed into that of a strange man covered entirely in ice, standing two times taller than an average adult male—he had transformed into Frost General Ice Rock of the Demon Lord's Army.

"...Time's up," Ice Rock's gravelly voice declared.

Ice Rock takes the Initiative!
Ice Rock Summons his allies!

“Shoot!”

The army of ruin had been summoned to sentence the Divine Nation of Lenea to its demise.

Long-legged Bugs answered his call.

Headhunting Bugs answered his call.

Brain Eaters answered his call.

Dark Elf Riflemen answered his call.

Gia the Assassin answered his call.

Curse Sage Moltar answered his call.

Witches of Regret, the Elfuur Sisters answered his call.

In the fire-engulfed capital of Lenea, a frenzied bout between the minions of the Holy and Evil Gods commenced.



Chapter 11: Settling the Score

IT was a moment that took everyone by surprise. Takuto Ira—the man they believed had foolishly invaded their country alone—transformed into a frost giant and used some mysterious ability to call forth the legions of darkness. Everyone who saw the twin girls appear at the end of the summoning instinctively realized that they were harbingers of death.

Yes, the Paladins blessed by the Holy God knew at a glance the true nature of the girls who hadn't even made their move yet.

“Witches! Witches have appeare— GAAAGH!”

KA-BOOOOOM! An explosive report reverberated through the area, threatening to pop the holy army's eardrums. As they covered their ears, they saw a Paladin's head split open like a pomegranate.

The twin who attacked first offered them a dainty smile as smoke billowed from the muzzle of the revolver grasped in her right hand.

“What's our goal~?” she asked cutely.

“To shoot anything that moves, ma'am!” her twin responded.

“Hyahaha! Scatter ants, scatter!”

With a clang, the Elfuur Sisters lifted a hulking weapon more than twice their size. It was a six-barrel, air-cooled, rotary machine gun connected to what looked like a metal backpack. Known as a minigun in the Land of the Gods, this weapon wasn't as small as its name suggested. This personification of destruction had inherited the firepower and destructive force of the bigger, 20 mm M61 Vulcan Gatling-style rotary cannon.

Casually holding aloft the gun no mortal could handle without extensive support, the sisters rotated its muzzle so it could bring death to their surroundings.

“Get out of the way! NOW!” Atou shouted at the top of her lungs to warn them.

But it was far too late for the Paladins to save themselves.

“FIRE!!” the twins bellowed in unison.

“GAUGH!”

“AGH!”

“GAAAAAAH!”

The ensuing scene was truly worthy of being called a picture of hell. The minigun, swung around by the strength of the Hero twins, emitted an eerie roar as it sprayed bullets, striking death into all it hit without discrimination.

The greatest misfortune the Paladins experienced during this attack was not knowing the nature of the weapon they were up against. Those who failed to take cover died where they stood, and even the ones who avoided fatal wounds suffered enough damage it hindered their ability to fight back.

“Disperse! Take down your designated targets!”

With a gigantic rifle slung over his shoulder and a murderous expression on his face, Gia ordered his Riflemen. A group of armed Dark Elves scattered in every direction.

Atou was about to unleash her tentacles after them, but Gia and several Riflemen stopped her with relentless gunfire.

“Curse you!” she spat. “I never knew this method of attack existed! I don’t have enough tentacles to spare!”

“This, too, is something His Majesty has commanded, Lady Atou. I never expected to face off with you of all people, however.”

“Elder Moltar! You old bat! Go back to your dusty laboratory in the Accursed Lands where you belong!” Atou snapped at him.

“Hohoho,” he chuckled at her. “I can’t do that. I need to make up for my past blunders before these old bones can be laid to rest. Without further ado—Land of Ruin!”

Behind the gunners, Elder Moltar swiftly cast Military Magic and executed the spell. The ground instantly decayed and miasma permeated the air. As the Holy God’s power vanished from the land, the forces of good felt their very souls tremble, as if they were being pulled into the pits of hell.

“My god! What’s going on?!”

“This is a special spell that weakens holy forces! It’ll cut our strength in half!”

Having to explain everything sucks! Atou thought. We’re just giving the enemy—giving Mynoghra a chance to get stronger!!

Everything from the Dark Elves to the grotesque bugs to the humanoid monsters wearing someone else’s skin, grew ten times stronger as they basked in the miasmatic air. Meanwhile, the forces of good suffered devastating damage from the crippling first attack.

Atou, who knew the devastating power of firearms, was somehow able to protect the other girls because the brunt of the attack was concentrated on her. Conversely, it could also be said that she was being held back because she

protected the injured Fenne and physically weak Soalina from the hail of bullets. Worse yet, the Land of Ruin terrain effect actively sapped their Strength. It acted like a lock on Atou's abilities, increasing the enemy's difficulty level in kind.

A decrease in Atou's combat potential spelled doom for Lenea.

"All right, let us get this party started. It's going to be a very, very lovely party." As it spoke, the Nameless Evil God's shape warped again.

Isla, Queen of Bugs has appeared in the world.

The Strength of all Bug units throughout the world has increased by +2.

An abomination appeared before the forces of good. The giant insect queen that couldn't possibly be of this world signaled the start of all-out war with her terrifyingly pleasant voice. The holy army of Lenea mustered its remaining strength and righteous motivation to fight back.

"Paladins to the front! Purge Arlos's unholy enemies!"

"O Lord, our maker! Grant me the strength to defeat evil!"

At Fjord's command, the able-bodied Paladins moved forward and chanted their holy spells. Each Paladin boasted the strength of a thousand ordinary soldiers, equaling an army on their own. Here a whole squadron of these elite units came together to draw their Holy Swords honed solely for destroying evil.

"Now go, my precious little ones," Isla said in her singsong voice. "Annihilate Mynoghra's enemies."

"I have mixed feelings about this development, but..." Caria paused, "I'll play along with His Majesty this time!"

"Let's do our bestest, everybody! Gooooooooo!" Maria cheered.

"GYEEEEEEEEEE!"

"GIGYEEEEEEEEEE!"

"MARVELOUS! IT CAN'T GET ANY MORE HUEMAN THAN THIS!"

"HUEMANS!"

Facing off against the forces of good was Mynoghra's venerated evil army, headed by the Witches of Regret and consisting of buffed Long-legged Bugs, Headhunting Bugs, and Brain Eaters with Humanoid-targeted attacks.

Both armies comprised only a few hundred, putting them on the smaller side. However, considering each individual's sheer power, a war on par with two full-scale armies clashing was about to unfold in Lenea.

"Damn you! Damn you all!!"

Atou frantically staved off the incessant downpour of bullets to the sound of Erakino's litany of curses. Bullets were as inconsequential as flies to Atou,

but it was a different story trying to protect the girls behind her from what was essentially a swarm of angry bees.

Erakino's Slurp had rewritten Atou's core nature to make her a member of the tabletop RPG forces. Reassigning her with this fake sense of comradery put them into continual tight spots they might've otherwise avoided.

"Oh no! Those rotten Dark Elves!"

"How could they! They've lit the city on fire!"

As soon as they realized it, the Paladins cried out in alarm—flames had enveloped Lenea's capital. That had to be the work of the Dark Elf squadron that had dispersed at the beginning of the fight.

Fires in an urban area consisting of densely clustered wooden buildings were deadly. If neglected, it'd eventually develop into a large-scale urban conflagration, which would raze the entire city. Having noticed the spreading disaster, Lenea's citizens started scrambling to escape. Since they were all busy fighting for their lives against Mynoghra, no Paladins were around to take charge of the situation in the capital.

No one was trying to stop the rapidly spreading flames. The city was on a one-way trip to absolute devastation.

"Tch!" Atou sucked on her teeth. "It will all be for nothing at this rate! Paladins! Protect the Saints and Erakino with your lives! I'll drive our enemies back!"

To Atou's relief, several High Paladins rushed over at her request. They scooped up Erakino and the Saints and retreated out of range of the bullets with all the speed their trained-to-the-limits bodies could muster.

Finally seeing an avenue of attack, Atou concentrated her strength into her legs. With one mighty leap, she should be able to get right next to the Riflemen, forcing them to cease fire out of fear of shooting each other. Once she collapsed their frontlines, she could roll out all sorts of strategies.

However...

"Aww, could it be you forgot about us?"

"I never thought we'd fight against you someday, Miss Atou."

...such a counterattack would never happen with the Elfuur Sisters there.

They had tossed aside their miniguns once they ran out of ammunition, drew the Demon Lord's weapons they had snatched during that fateful battle, and wielded them madly as they sliced at Atou with all the malice of the incarnation of evil.

"Argh! Cheeky brats! Too bad you came at the wrong time of day! It's currently daytime! Not only is there no moon out, but the sun is still high in the sky. You're far from being able to use a pittance of your strength!"

Atou's comments as she easily dodged the two Witches were exactly right. The twins were Witches born of the brilliance of the moon and tragedy. Their full power and insanity manifested only on the night of the full moon. They couldn't use the abilities lying dormant within them during the opposite time of day, reducing them to little more than warriors with slightly more strength than the rest.

But...would Takuto seriously overlook such a thing? Was he really someone who wouldn't work it into his strategy?

"Do you honestly believe that, my sweet little Atou?" asked the refined voice of a lady from the grotesque body of a bug with a blotched-out face.

"What are you on about now...?"

Atou furrowed her brow in contemplation. No amount of skill or intuition could have possibly led her to the answer...as Takuto Ira in the guise of Isla faded away.

"My name is Luna. The symbol of darkness floating in the night sky."

The world suddenly sank into night under the watchful gaze of the gigantic, luminous moon.

"This is lunacy!!" Atou cried.

The night of the full moon was being reenacted in the middle of the day. The evil god capable of becoming anyone because he was no one had finally gone and imitated a natural phenomenon.

"AHAHAHaHAHaHaHAhA!!!"

And with the appearance of the full moon, the twin Witches born from regret awoke from their long slumber within the gentle embrace of sanity to madly display their might.

"Again! Yet again, people have shown up to steal our happiness! I knew it! I just knew it! The world hates us! It despises us!!" Caria wailed.

"Hehehehe," Maria giggled. "What fools. It would've never come to this if you'd only lived without quarreling. Nobody woulda lost anything that way."

"Plague."

"Addle."

They unleashed the most sinister, detestable skills at maximum output. Even with their high resistance to all status effects, they were up against two different Witch debuffs. Most of the Paladins desperately tried not to forget their holy mission as they fell to their knees from the disease eating away at them.

"GHH! Wh-What sorcery is this?! How could this happen?!" Fjord cried, his face twisting in despair.

The over a hundred or so Paladins he had brought to this fight were at all different levels of skill and experience, but they were elites with the strength of

over a thousand normal men. These holy knights who served as Arlos's vanguard, as the shields of light protecting the people, crumpled pathetically before evil's unforgiving malice.

"Don't get cocky, damn braaaaaaaaaaaaaaats!"

"I won't let you continue your mayhem!"

Erakino and Soalina leaped into action at the same time. Did they finally figure out how to counterattack, or were they just sick of staying on the defensive when it wasn't getting them anywhere? Whatever pushed them to act, it was too little too late. Soalina's flames forgot their purpose due to Maria's skill, and Erakino's raised arm rotted right off before it could slash Caria.

"Miss Atou, Miss Atou!" Maria called out to her. "Whaddya gonna do now?! All your precious friends are gonna keep dying, you know? Doesn't that make you sad? Doesn't it hurt? Doesn't it make you want to give up living? Then let's forget all about them! Forget about everything!!"

"You may be very strong, Miss Atou, but you can't stop me and Big Sista," Caria added. "I mean, Cary and Big Sista have things to do, so would you please get out of our way, you deadbeat freeloader?"

Their strength increased as the twins breezily repelled Witch Erakino and Saint Soalina's feeble attempts at an attack. Atou hadn't stopped attacking with her tentacles the whole time, but an endless barrage of bullets showered them from every angle in the darkness, and an assortment of Long-legged Bugs and Brain Eaters prevented anything from getting close to the Elfur Sisters. All the while, the girls bearing both The Hero and Hero Unit traits giggled as they held hands and committed deeds so evil that it'd put most villains to shame.

"Rot the whole city."

"Forget the whole city."

"No! You can't be serious! Your abilities can expand to cover an entire city now?!" Atou's surprised cry echoed helplessly. An invisible power fell over the capital like a thin veil, afflicting the innocent lives within its wide reach.

Atou and her friends were never the twins' target. Their true objective was to Plague and Addle Lenea's capital. The citizens were infected with a terrible disease that needed constant care but wouldn't set them free with death. And at the same time, they were made to forget all about the Holy God they had believed in their whole lives.

How would people who made their belief in god the basis for their lives, live once they had forgotten him? How would people protected by the Church's authority and Arlos's miracles overcome the disease without god's aid?

Takuto Ira had summoned the Witches of Regret for no other reason than to plunge this nation into a hell of his own making.

“Hoho, Gia and the rest are doing Mynoghra proud.” Elder Moltar stroked his beard with satisfaction as he stood in the rear, giving orders to the various monsters.

To the untrained eye, he looked defenseless. Almost like he was just asking to be attacked. The forces of good weren’t disoriented enough to let such an opening go to waste. Soalina promptly tried to attack with her holy flames. Her target was none other than the Curse Sage commanding the Dark Elves.

But even that undertaking ended in vain. The old man had disappeared under the cover of darkness. Darkness obscured their surroundings, leaving only their immediate vicinity visible, thanks to the moonlight and fire-engulfed city. As someone unaccustomed to nighttime battles, Soalina couldn’t possibly locate the elderly Dark Elf Sage who lived for the night. The crisis only escalated while she tried.

“AGH! ...Damn it! Damn you!!!!”

“Oh no! A-Are you all right, Erakino?!” Soalina turned her attention to her friend. “L-Let me see your injuries— Aaaaah!” She screamed when she saw Erakino’s arm had rotted off, leaving just her bloody shoulder.

Erakino was still conscious, but her complexion was deathly pale. She had a much higher recovery rate as a Witch, but her injuries were clearly at the point where she needed immediate medical attention. And the only person capable of healing her—the Game Master—still maintained radio silence.

Attacking the city was a show of confidence. Mynoghra was showing off that they could continue spreading despair even as they held back multiple Witches and Saints. It wasn’t long before the twins’ abilities fulfilled their objective. And once that was done, Takuto Ira would commence trampling them underfoot like ants.

With the GM’s Arbiter skill sealed and the Order of Paladins squashed, Atou was the only fighter they had left. Due to the way she was designed, Erakino could only manifest her abilities with the Game Master’s support, and Soalina’s Miracle Artes were rendered useless by the potential of Flamin’s existence whenever she attacked. Fenne had withdrawn from the frontlines due to her injuries, and even if she somehow recovered, her abilities were unreliable.

When it came down to it, Takuto was not the kind of opponent Atou could defeat on her own.

“We’re screwed! Help us! Help me, Master...!” Erakino begged.

“Stay with me, Erakino! Someone! Anyone! Please carry her away!”

No one responded to Soalina’s pleas for help. Most of her army was either having their flesh skinned off by disturbing humanoid monsters or were being greedily devoured by creepy antlike bugs.

Atou was frantically repelling the bullet hail, and Fenne was out of the picture. Meanwhile, Soalina had neither the means nor the wisdom to overcome this situation. Despair crept in and took over Soalina's thoughts, leading her to believe it was all over, when...

"My name is Keiji." A deep, masculine voice spoke from Erakino's dying body. "My full name is Keiji Kuhara. Is this where I should say, 'Nice to meet you'?" Erakino continued through the blood dripping from her mouth.

It was obviously not her voice or her choice of words. Soalina finally realized what had just happened. The Game Master was taking a gamble. He laid his cards on the table by giving his name to get them out of this predicament. He did so by borrowing Erakino's mouth to speak from another plane.

"My old man used to say that every man has one point in their life when they have to bet it all... I'm damn certain this is that point for me."

Night dawned and Takuto Ira stood silently in their presence. His entire body was shrouded in darkness, but his gleaming gaze fastened on Erakino. Or rather, it was locked onto Keiji, who was borrowing her body to interfere with this world.

"You said your name is Takuto Ira, yeah? You're good at games. I never played one myself. Gambling was more my thing... Not that knowing a lot about something makes you good at it, though."

Takuto maintained his silence. His blotched-out expression was as unreadable as ever, giving the appearance that only a rift of pure darkness existed where he loomed.

"Mine was a life of constant losing. I ended up like this because I lost big time at a yakuza-run underground casino. Loss after loss continued after that, and even now, I find myself close to losing to you."

All the color had leached from Erakino's face to the point you'd think she was dead, and the blood pouring from her shoulder had slowed so much, Soalina wondered if she had any blood left. But the Game Master continued to use her mouth to ramble on about his resolve and intentions.

"But ya know what? I won't let it end here! I've got goals, damn it! I'll win this game in the end and have my dreams come true! So, let's do it, Takuto Ira."

An eerie stillness fell over the battlefield. No one ordered the armies to stop, but both sides naturally stepped back to watch how things played out. It was almost as if this was the real battle to decide the winner.

"I challenge you to a game. If you can curse me to death, just try it!"

"Ngh, ggg, aaa-aaa... Good for you. Such a spell doesn't exist."

It took some time before Takuto answered Keiji's long-winded harangue. Did he need the time because he wasn't used to speaking in this form, or did he

have an entirely different reason? Either way, he resumed his silence after he informed Keiji of this. His shadowy form seemed to waver.

“Haha... Hahahah... BWAHAHA...”

The Game Master’s—Keiji Kuhara’s dry laughter echoed from Erakino’s lifeless body. Was he laughing out of relief? Excitement? He continued this belly laughter for a long moment before stopping and looking emotionally up at the sky.

“Haha. My life was nothing but a stream of losses. I never did well at anything I tried, and one day, I just found myself wrapped up in this craziness.”

In some other plane, in a dark room with just a table, chair, and something like a TV, Keiji shouted at the top of his lungs, “But y’know what? Even a scumbag like me has some damn pride! I decided when I died that I’d man up and struggle with everything I’ve got in me to be sure not to go out as a pathetic loser the next time!”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Cease fighting and accept my ruling.

“I win! I won this bet!” Keiji whooped.

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Completely eliminate Mynoghra’s army.

Revive and fully heal the Divine Nation of Lenea’s forces.

Eliminate all evil afflicting the Divine Nation of Lenea.

The dead rose and light returned to the Divine Nation. The legion of monsters and Dark Elves vanished, and the peace that preceded their arrival returned. The raging fires, the utterly devastated cathedral, and the deceased Paladins...quickly regained their former glory like a movie put in rewind.

Mynoghra’s army was gone.

Everything from the twin sisters who dished out pain and suffering like candy, to the Dark Elves who operated in the darkness, to the ferocious monsters, to the decayed land, had disappeared as if it never existed.

System Message

All requests have been processed.

Deleting a Player goes beyond the GM’s authority and has been skipped.

“...What a tricky system,” Keiji muttered. “How about this, then?”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Seal Takuto Ira’s abilities as the Nameless Evil God.

“Looks like that’ll do it.”

A pleased voice resonated loudly through the chapel that had regained its former state. Before he knew what hit him, Takuto was standing all alone on top of the pulpit, surrounded by the forces of good.

Just like that, he lost everything. His friends, his subordinates, his abilities...all of it, gone.

“It doesn’t matter how many times you lose—it can all be canceled out and made right with a single big win,” Keiji declared. “That’s what makes gambling worth it. Gotta offer up my gratitude to our almighty Dice God.”

The victor was decided here.

Keiji loudly declared his successful gamble. He reveled in the success of forging a new path for himself. Settling the score was surprisingly anticlimactic. Putting his mind to it was all it took to cinch victory.

He came to the conclusion that Takuto Ira was nothing more than a fool—a failed conman who’d only made it this far with bluffs and manipulation.

“There’s no way left for you to win. It’s game over for you, Takuto Ira.”

Under the scornful eyes of Lenea’s Saints, Paladins, and the Witch he loved, Takuto was mercilessly slapped with the declaration of his defeat.

Truly alone for the first time, all he could do was choke on those words.

Interlude: The Legend

THIS is the story of a certain man in a place far removed from the world where Mynoghra and Lenea waged war. This man had a peculiar lot in life. Despite consistently winning the in-person tournaments hosted by *Eternal Nations*' game developer, he never rose above second place on the online leaderboards. He appeared to be in his late twenties and had a charming and good-humored sort of personality that belied his nature as a gamer.

Known for his sun-kissed skin, toned figure, and friendly smile, the young man was currently sitting in a café being interviewed.

"Thank you very much for meeting with me when you're so busy, Mr. cLoser," the interviewer said. "You did me a big favor coming to the city center for this interview."

"Don't mention it. I happened to have some time today. I'm the one who should be thanking you. I can't believe I'm being interviewed for a gaming magazine. Kinda nerve-racking."

"What are you talking about?" the interviewer asked with a lighthearted smile. "I can't possibly believe a popular streamer with a stunning record in *Eternal Nations* could ever be nervous. Not when you live stream almost every day. You're being too modest here."

"Haha! You got me there. Not much I can say in response to that, is there?"

The young man's name was cLoser. Obviously, that was his username. Sitting across from him was an up-and-coming editor for a popular gaming magazine with a long history. Although the magazine struggled to stay afloat during the Internet age, it was still highly respected in the industry for its insight, opinions, and top-of-the-line news. The magazine was running a special feature on *Eternal Nations*, interviewing the game's most famous players involved in the rapidly growing Esports category.

Lively banter continued between them after their initial greetings. The interview was really starting to take off when the editor suddenly said, "We were hoping to have Takuto Ira join us for this interview as well, but he sadly rejected the invitation..." cLoser raised an eyebrow at that comment and quietly urged the interviewer to continue. "Say, Mr. cLoser, do you know if the rumors are true? Have you heard anything?"

"Beats me. I don't know anything. I used to be obsessed with trying to get

at least one look at that guy's face, though! To this day, I haven't had the chance to meet him in person."

"Hahaha. I should have expected as much."

cLoser was the undefeated second-place player in *Eternal Nations*. As an internationally renowned game, *Eternal Nations*' official tournament came with numerous big-time sponsors and ran for several days.

Tournament spectators could enjoy watching the intense battles and mind-blowing strategies play out in person at the venue and from the comfort of their homes through the online stream. On the other hand, players were placed under strict surveillance and required to play from the tournament's designated location to prevent cheating. If that wasn't stressful enough, players were monitored 24/7 during the tournament's duration, giving them no freedom to go outside or even relax at their hotel at the end of the day.

People often speculated that it was due to these specific rules that the player known as Takuto Ira was unable to participate in the official tournaments. Gossip ran wild with speculations, such as him having too important of a job to participate or that his family wouldn't let him. Some even wondered...if he was deathly ill. Rumors about him being sick seemed the most reliable, which was why it was an unspoken rule in the gaming community not to dig into his life.

As a result of Takuto's absence, cLoser reigned as the undefeated victor of *Eternal Nations*' official tournaments. Many skilled players worldwide participated in these tournaments, where they could receive lofty sums of money and luxury goods from big-name sponsors, leading to epic battles unfolding every time. The results of the official tournaments fell roughly in line with *Eternal Nations*' online leaderboard, give or take a few minor variations.

If Takuto Ira actually participated in the tournament, he would be the victor. Even if his nerves somehow made him lose the championship, he wouldn't fall below second place. Every fan of *Eternal Nations* openly believed as much, which left cLoser feeling vexed.

"So...I know this is a tad rude to ask of the man called 'The King who can't be King,' but..."

"You want to know the secret to Takuto Ira's strength?" cLoser supplied with an undaunted smile.

It was more than his charismatic personality that prevented him from getting annoyed at the interviewer for slapping him in the face with the Internet's nickname for him. No, he was far too busy simmering over Takuto Ira's overwhelming presence in his life.

Anyone involved in the game industry had heard the name Takuto Ira at least once. Just as he was known as the mysterious number-one ranked player in

Eternal Nations, his same username had appeared in a ton of other games too. He'd achieved outstanding results in every game, earning him a cohort of fans drawn to his mysterious history and people who just wanted to know the secret to his gaming skills.

The magazine editor probably wanted to offer some fanservice to all the Takuto fanboys and girls out there. If he couldn't meet with the legend himself, asking someone from the same gaming sphere was the next best option.

cLoser felt more than a little slighted being used as a pretext to talk about another player, but he wasn't such a fool as to say anything under this username that would get him trolled and hated for life in the gaming industry. Besides that...he painfully shared in their desire to know more about the elusive legend.

Fine, I'll pay lip service about the Takuto Ira I know, he decided.

"Good question... I would say he has one trait that stands out. Or should I call it a bad habit?" cLoser said suggestively.

"And what would that be?" the editor asked, leaning in.

"He fools around every time. It's like he cuts corners or underestimates his opponents. He makes naïve decisions like he's thinking, 'Eh, this should be good enough.' That's his bad habit."

"Yeaah...okay," the editor drawled, sounding doubtful. "But won't that lead to an instant game over if you do something like that during the early stages? I know all too well that *Eternal Nations* isn't a forgiving game."

"Exactly," cLoser said with a nod, his estimation of the editor rising a peg. Not needing the interviewee to explain every little detail about the subject is the bare minimum requirement for a halfway decent interviewer. Seeing as the interviewer had some understanding, cLoser figured he'd comprehend his honest evaluation of Takuto Ira. "And that's why he's the best there is."

cLoser quietly closed his eyes in thought. Every game session he'd ever played replayed in his mind's eye like it was being projected on a TV display. This was a skill he'd acquired from an astounding memory and playing the same game a million times over until it made him capable of simulating game sessions that were long over.

The skill did cLoser little good, however. No matter how many times he simulated the game sessions in his head, they always ended with him losing to Takuto.

If there was one thing cLoser knew without a doubt as a man who knew more about *Eternal Nations* than anyone else and could proudly declare he was strongest—save for Takuto—it was this:

"No one can beat Takuto Ira when he gets serious," he declared, looking up at the heavens in resignation, even though he had reached the peak of what a

human can achieve in his own field.

Stunned to silence by the deadly serious edge to cLoser's words, the interviewer swallowed loudly.

Silence ran between them as though time itself had stopped until the melting ice cube in their cups shifted with a clank, restarting the world once more.

"If you want a story, editor, then I'd listen to what I'm about to say very closely. I once seriously believed that he might be an AI developed by some tech company. I don't know what his deal is, but I suspect he's cheating to maintain his winner's streak."

cLoser thought back to the sequence of events that led to him admitting his defeat and Takuto Ira's superiority. One day, back when he was still madly chasing Takuto's shadow, he initiated a voice chat with him just once. The voice on the other side of the line sounded painfully hoarse and feeble, making him doubt he was speaking to the real Takuto Ira at all. It just didn't feel real. That's why it inevitably led to cLoser having doubts and an insatiable desire to unmask his greatest rival.

"A word of advice. I know you're interested in Takuto Ira, but it's best not to piss him off."

The interviewer was about to say that would never happen, but he shrunk back like a frog locked in a snake's hungry gaze when he saw the warning look on cLoser's face. Sometimes a good article requires a reporter to take more radical means to get the scoop. The interviewer realized that the other man had seen through his intentions to employ such means with Takuto.

"You're freakin' screwed once you cause him to snap. He'll use any means to get back at you until your mind breaks under the pressure. I promised to never get involved with him again."

The interviewer was curious about what had happened between Takuto and cLoser in the past. His magazine would fly off the shelves if he could dig up the dirt and turn it into a scoop. It'd only help improve the magazine's standing. But he realized the impossibility of getting anything out of the young man in front of him from the sheer terror on the gamer's face.

"I still get chills just hearing his name," cLoser whispered shakily.

The interviewer nodded, vowing not to pry deeper.

cLoser's hands were visibly shaking.

Chapter 12: The End

“OKAY, then I propose a motion to penalize Keiji Kuhara in the name of session participant Takuto Ira.”

System Message

**A motion to penalize Game Master Keiji Kuhara has been accepted.
All progress will be suspended until the deliberation is complete.**

“...What?”

Nobody followed what had happened, not the Paladins, the Witches, the Saints...or even the Game Master.

Time stopped once more.

An invisible force took control of the board, denying the use of their powers.

Takuto's life should've been like a candle in the wind, moments from being snuffed out for good. But the King of Ruin put an end to that false notion.

“Wow, I didn't know what to do because you suddenly started boring me with your life story. Is that what's in these days...? What do you think, Atou? Ah, right. You're still on their side, so I shouldn't engage you yet. Man, am I jittery. Gotta calm down first.”

Takuto was being unusually talkative because of the nervousness he alluded to. He rarely spoke this much to strangers, although he seemed to be speaking to himself more than the people surrounding him. As it was, it was quite a hurdle for him to jump, talking to strangers with his social awkwardness.

Of course, that was a non-issue when smack-talking to his enemies. Proper communication requires caring about what the other person thinks. Takuto was more than capable of speaking for hours on end if he didn't give a damn about the other person.

“Anyways, Keiji, was it?” Takuto said, addressing the Game Master. **“You did me a big favor by telling me your real name. I was never able to dig up your name, no matter whose form I took or tried to persuade to tell me. Since you know, proposing a motion to penalize another participant has to be done outside the session, in the Players' realm. I needed your real name to distinguish between the two for the system.”**

The Players' dimension was different from the game board's. For example, Atou and Erakino both possessed unparalleled strength and abilities, but they were no more than pieces on the board borrowing from the game settings. But the Players had both their abilities on the board and that of a higher dimension.

Keiji had the abilities of a Game Master capable of manipulating a tabletop RPG's mechanics and pieces. Meanwhile, Takuto had the abilities of a Player capable of manipulating the 4x strategy game's mechanics and pieces, plus he functioned as one of the pieces on the board with his nature as a Commander/Hero unit.

Since the motion to penalize another player happens outside the game session, it was necessary to bring up the real names of both Players to bring it into play. And so, Takuto had been trying all sorts of strategies to learn the GM's name and seal his powers.

System Message

Player Takuto Ira, please submit your complaints.

The system was rushing Takuto. Temporary pauses should be avoided for a better gameplay experience. As faithful as this system was to the tabletop RPG rules, it likely wanted to restart the session as soon as possible.

Takuto felt the same way. He wanted to end this farce as soon as possible.

"Right then, sorry about that. I'll get right to it. My complaints against Keiji here are as follows:

Prolonged refusal to introduce himself.

Forced changes of the dice outcomes without proper cause and abused to steal a participant's character.

Unfair manipulation of in-game data by GM Authority without rolling the dice.

Arbitrarily manipulating the game progress to his advantage.

Disruption of in-game worldview and order by disclosing the GM's Authority to the board's dimension.

Use of owned characters to slander participant Takuto Ira.

Slandering participant Takuto Ira with his own mouth.

"Oh, and let's just tack this on for good measure:

Talking about himself and ruining the flow of the story for selfish reasons.

...I find the above reasons to be grounds to determine that he is not qualified to be the Game Master responsible for the smooth progress of this game session under the rules laid out by the tabletop RPG Elemental Ward. A motion to penalize him was invoked for these reasons. I propose that each

participant in this session gets to vote on if we should revoke Keiji Kuhara's GM Authority."

System Message

Your submission has been accepted.

It has been recognized as a legitimate disciplinary motion and given over to a vote.

The game system worked in the Players' favor, but that didn't mean it was completely on their side. The system was a slave to its rules and settings. It couldn't act outside of its pre-established rules, no matter how much the Player wanted it to, nor would it distort the rules just because the Player was at a disadvantage. Conversely, any lawlessness was fair game if you played within the rules. Ultimately, it was crucial to understand the rules if you wanted to use the system to your advantage.

"S-Soalina!" Atou shouted. "We have to stop King Takuto! Hurry—"

"System, please stop outside interference," Takuto requested.

System Message

Sludge Atou and Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials' actions have been canceled. They can no longer take action.

Atou and Soalina's attempt at an attack was nullified with a single request. Interestingly enough, what Takuto had just done was almost identical to the GM's Arbiter ability, forcing the TRPG side to grudgingly accept there was no worming their way out of this one.

"Shall we get back to it then? The system is requesting a vote here... I'll start. Takuto Ira here!" He raised his right hand and declared, **"I strongly believe that Keiji's GM Authority should be revoked! We shouldn't overlook his misconduct. The situation needs to be rectified."**

There was no immediate reaction, but his declaration was obviously doing something vital in the background.

I can't let this deliberation continue! Finding himself suddenly like a fish out of water, Keiji desperately struggled against the odds despite being at the mercy of a situation he was ill-equipped to handle.

"Stripping the GM of authority isn't fair! I object!" he cried out.

"The person called out for their actions can't participate in the vote."

Takuto's ruthless explanation crushed any hopes Keiji had of resisting. If Keiji couldn't participate, that left Takuto as the only voting Player. He was the only person capable of partaking in this deliberation.

The result was inevitable, reducing this entire exchange to little more than a charade. After all, the whole situation had been crafted so that only Takuto Ira's claims would be considered.

System Message

Approved: 1

Opposed: 0

Based on the above results, Keiji Kuhara's Authority as Game Master will be revoked.

The true victor had been decided once and for all.

What had caused the Saints'—or rather, the TRPG forces' defeat? An insufficient understanding of the game system? A lack of cooperation among their members? Or was it the decision to announce the Game Master's real name without considering their opponent's strategy? All of those elements were responsible for their downfall, and yet none of the above were the final nail in the coffin. What did them in was the damning mistake of making an enemy out of the human known as Takuto Ira.

"Oh, and please set right all the wrongs," Takuto said in a lighthearted voice to the system. **"I can't accept how this game session played out with all his misconduct. It's my right as a Player to request as much, right? Hm, resetting everything would change things on too large of a scale, so I'm good with just the unreasonable stuff being undone."**

"W-Wait!"

System Message

Keiji Kuhara's Game Master Authority has been revoked.

Proceeding to undo all unreasonable outcomes executed by him during this session.

A different hell was reversed back into place this time. The chapel crumbled, and the Paladins were reduced to corpses without even uttering a scream. Flames erupted from the city and blighted land plagued the people. Last but not least, the forces of ruin reappeared from the nothingness they'd been cast into.

Mynoghra's forces didn't quite grasp the situation and shared a collective look of confusion. But they seemed to realize the winner had been decided and patiently sat on the sidelines to see how things played out. After all...there's nothing left to do after everything is done and over.

The forces of good had no right to try anything funny after Takuto defeated

them...

“Why?! Why can you do such a thing?! How did you know you even could?!” Borrowing Erakino’s mouth, Keiji lobbed his distraught, anger-filled questions at Takuto.

For Keiji, this ending was unimaginable. Keiji had also received the game’s rulebook when he was unluckily chosen by the Dice God and granted the game system the Dice God had luckily chosen for him. He read and reread that thick manual a dozen times in the space given to him in a higher dimension than this one. Even when it came to Erakino—his subordinate and mouthpiece used to make his wishes a reality on the board—it took countless attempts to get her just right.

He’d devastated Qualia’s Northern Province, suffered counterattacks from the Saints, and learned how troublesome his TRPG abilities were. As far as he was concerned, he’d only made it this far after learning the importance of allies, reliable subordinates, and obtaining a nation to call his own by repeating the same exact battles. Then he had finally reached the point of being able to get the jump on one of the opposing forces and even obtained their powerful character in the process.

By the time he reached the point of thinking it wasn’t half bad to have friends and allies...everything went up in smoke.

Isn’t there a limit to how far out of left field things can be? I never expected everything to come to an end with such a heavy-handed method, Keiji lamented.

“Oh yeah, you were chosen by a dice roll, weren’t you, Keiji? Makes sense you wouldn’t know then,” Takuto said, nodding to himself like everything made perfect sense. Keiji stood at the opposite end of the spectrum—nothing about what Takuto was about to tell him made any sense whatsoever.

“*Elemental Ward* is infamous for how much emphasis it places on player etiquette. It got mixed reviews because of the quarrels between players who start up these disciplinary deliberations. You’d know just how annoying they can be if you’ve ever played a session with anyone before.”

Is it really okay for someone to have an uncomfortable game experience they would rather forget? The team behind *Elemental Ward* were staunchly against such poor player experiences, leading them to design a game that helped players adhere to good sense and proper manners in all sorts of situations. They put in the utmost care and effort to ensure the players always had a great game.

But...they went too far in the opposite direction. Their efforts resulted in a rulebook with a paranoid level of rules relating to player manners, unaware that it’d lead to the session participants lobbing constant complaints at each other

over the smallest things. The creators had forgotten the most important thing—no matter how much consideration is given to the rules and gameplay, the story will always unfold with human words and dice...

“I’ve got experience playing *Elemental Ward* online, you see,” Takuto continued. **“I’ve had the opportunity to participate in sessions hosted by all different people.”**

Yes, the creators had forgotten that no matter how wonderful of a system they had crafted, even the best tabletop RPG could be ruined if there was a single person who did whatever they wanted to the extent the rules allowed, destroying the experience for everyone else.

For example...

“And I opened up deliberations every single time.”

...Someone just like Takuto Ira.

He threw his arms wide open, recalling a proud moment in his life, and then he unapologetically extolled the actions he took during past game sessions that had surely ticked off the other participants. He likely became convinced this operation would succeed when the system accepted his complaint about a lack of introductions. Even if it’d been impossible to propose a motion to penalize the Game Master in the Player’s dimension, Takuto undoubtedly had plenty of other schemes at the ready.

That’s just who Takuto Ira was as a person.

No tricks or cheats worked on him, for he was in control of everything. The brain that kept him ranked number 1 in *Eternal Nations* didn’t allow anyone to unseat him.

“Ah, well, it’s also the best way to instantly destroy any friendship with other players and get yourself blacklisted from future sessions... But anyway, it’s nothing to fret about. I’ve got loads of experience in that department,” the King of Ruin asserted confidently, as if he didn’t care about others’ thoughts or feelings one bit.

With that final pronouncement, the system finished processing Takuto’s request and reset everything back to when the Game Master, Keiji Kuhara, had created the current Erakino.

In other words...

“Okay...enough chitchat. I’ll ask you to return my Atou, Mr. Keiji Kuhara.”

...things were reset back to how they were before Sludge Atou had been Slurped away.

Elemental Ward Rulebook

Regarding Problem Behavior

Even if you envision having a great game together, there will always be a person or two who won't agree with that vision.

Unfortunately, we must understand and be prepared for the fact that not everyone cooperates with others out of goodwill.

If it's determined that there's a problem with a participant's actions or remarks, the game must be temporarily paused, and the issue must be resolved immediately. Of course, it's best if these deliberations are carried out with everyone's consent, taking into account common sense, ethics, and the rulebook.

This rulebook is strongly against postponing the problem to continue the game, as the quality of the session will deteriorate if the issues persist. All participants have the right and obligation to create the best game experience.

※ If a participant is behaving poorly or is unwilling to improve, other participants may propose a "disciplinary motion" aimed at imposing strong penalties on said participant, including exclusion from the game. In this event, a vote should be taken by all participants, except the participant called into question, and if the majority agrees, the session can be stopped and the content reconsidered. Game Masters are also subject to disciplinary motions, and if the majority agrees, it's possible to immediately end the session and reset progress to the desired level.

DURING the time everything was reset...Atou forgot all about their animosity and raced over to Takuto.

“King Takuto!”

“Atou!”



She threw her arms around her master's neck like a heroine in a romance novel. Takuto caught her and held her to his chest, breaking into a grin even as he struggled to process her assertive embrace.

"What a relief," he said. "I was worried like crazy. I'm thrilled you came back to me."

"Me too... I'm so sorry for worrying you, King Takuto! BUT! I just knew you would rescue me from this prison!"

How far back did the rewind reset her thoughts and memories? Did her suspicions dissipate the moment she was reassigned to Mynoghra? Whatever the case, Atou trembled with emotion, feeling greater respect and loyalty toward her master, who managed to epically toy with and destroy their enemies even under such hopeless circumstances.

"She's like a damsel in distress," Caria said.

"Damsel where? She seriously tried to kill us," Maria pouted.

Contrary to the happy reunion between Takuto and Atou, the twins were displeased they had to continually clean up after this annoying couple. That said, even they seemed happy to have Atou back, as they smiled even while they griped.

"My king, the Riflemen have completed all their objectives," Elder Moltar interrupted the cheerful mood with that report as he took a knee before his king.

"Okay, thanks." Takuto felt like he didn't have to go that far, but he didn't realize that Elder Moltar was equally floored with emotion by Takuto's display of strategic brilliance. **"Let's see...at this point it's practically a dead rubber. Everything really did play out perfectly."**

The TRPG system reset everything in the best possible way for Takuto. The majority of Paladins were downed by their injuries, some were delirious with Maria's Forget, while others suffered from Caria's Plague. Commander Fjord lay dead in a corner of the battlefield as if his momentary return was a fever dream. Fenne had collapsed from her injuries, and Soalina was barely standing from the strain she placed on her body through the constant use of her Miracle Artes.

Meanwhile, Mynoghra's forces were almost fully restored. A handful of Long-legged Bugs, Brain Eaters, and other units had been lost, but the Dark Elf Riflemen, Elder Moltar, and Mynoghra's other vital members were unharmed.

The system undid the outcomes Keiji had unfairly obtained with the Arbiter ability. It selectively undid only the results that benefited the TRPG forces. For that reason, the damage Mynoghra had inflicted on Lenea remained, and only the GM's forced healing was lifted.

The Divine Nation's forces were left in such a devastated state they

couldn't even regroup. That's why Takuto and Atou had such a carefree reunion despite being in enemy territory. Lenea's capital was no longer a battlefield where they had to keep their guard up.

"Kh..." Takuto sharply inhaled.

"Wh-What's wrong, King Takuto?"

Just as Takuto had said, there wasn't any threat left to them...or so they thought.

He suddenly held a hand to his head like he was enduring a hammering headache. Atou noticed his pain before anyone else and put a steadying arm around his shoulder, blanching as she searched his face.

"Welp, I think...I might've overdone it..."

Takuto made a similar pained gesture when he'd transformed into Flamin. He had the ability to imitate everything, even the game system, allowing him to wield unparalleled power depending on how he used it. There were infinite ways to apply that power, and it was unbeatable in the hands of someone as clever as Takuto.

A power able to wreak a different kind of havoc from Atou's own Skill Steal obviously came with risks.

"King Takuto! Did you push yourself too far to rescue me?!"

"Just a bit..."

Atou immediately realized the great lengths her master went to save her. She understood the burden he had to take on just to rescue her.

"Oh, King Takutooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!" Atou wailed. She clung to Takuto and bawled her eyes out like a child. Even Takuto felt a bit disturbed seeing his clothes get stained with her snot and tears, but he gently separated from her, careful not to hurt her feelings.

"I know, I know. That's a good girl," he soothed. "But since we're still in enemy territory here, gimme a little space, okay?"

"Miss Atou, come here," Caria said.

"Gotcha!" Maria exclaimed.

"Aaaaah! How cruel~!" Atou lamented.

The perfectly in-sync Elfuur Sisters secured Atou and dragged her off. Neither wanted to witness a sappy romance scene unfold before their eyes.

Hurry up and finish this. I want to go home, they both thought.

"All right, why don't we clean up here and head home?" Takuto ordered with the casualness of someone who'd gone out camping with his friends. **"I'm tired, so I want some R&R."**

In reality, the forces of good were mostly crippled from their injuries or dead, and the people they were meant to serve and protect were being tormented

by the Plague and Addle skills the twins had sicced on them. But to Takuto, their misery was just another part of his day. He was the King of Ruin, after all.

“Oh yeah, Elder Moltar, can you order everyone to gather?” he asked the elderly sage.

“As you command, my liege. I will gather your subordinates at once.”

If Takuto could use the *Brave Questers*’ skill to summon his army here, he could send them back the same way.

As Takuto was preparing to go home, ignoring Lenea’s remnants, he incited rage within Erakino, who’d regained consciousness after Keiji was stripped of his authority. She would never accept defeat.

“Not yet!” she roared. “It’s not over yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeet!”

Unfortunately for her, everything had already ended.

“GAHA!!”

“Do you honestly believe it isn’t over?”

Takuto kicked Erakino away before his subordinates could eliminate her and raised his hand to stop them. Then he leisurely strolled over to where she’d landed.

A gaping hole had formed in her stomach and one of her arms had rotted off. The former was the critical wound Takuto had inflicted on her while imitating Soalina, while the latter was the work of Caria’s Plague. The Game Master had unreasonably healed those injuries, so the system naturally set things back the way they should be.

Takuto let out a disinterested sigh as he stared down at Erakino. It was a miracle the girl was still breathing, let alone lunging at him.

“I don’t sense the GM anymore,” he said coolly. **“He probably lost all ability to interfere with this realm. It’s a bit worrisome that I can’t finish him off directly, but what can I do? I doubt he’ll come down here any time soon.”**

Erakino wheezed and gasped for air. Either her nature as a Witch or her status as a key game character kept her alive, but one look at the state she was in made it abundantly clear that her life was doomed to sputter out like a candle doused in water.

“You’re...nothing more than a TRPG character. All your power comes from that game system. Now that the GM’s Authority has been revoked, you wouldn’t have lived much longer anyway, even if you weren’t injured,” Takuto explained the situation to Erakino like he was instructing an ignorant child.

Erakino was aware of that reality without him telling her, so she directed her spite-filled gaze at Takuto like a knife and got one final jab in. “You piece of

shit gamer... You're a loser who's acting like a big shot when you're mooching offa other people's powers! Get off your high horse! Someday...I'll kill you!"

She thought Takuto would ignore her taunting again, but he burst out laughing instead.

"AhAHHAHAHAHA! What a joke! Everybody here is borrowing power from something or another. Do you think you're any different? Really? You? The girl who went around abusing the GM's power like it's your sugar daddy's credit card? You need a better dis! Pft! Bahahahahahaha!!"

He buckled over laughing like he'd just heard a comedian tell his best joke. Seeing him suddenly laugh like that was so eerily creepy that even his own people gaped at him.

"...Was that the wrong time to laugh? Shoot. I did it again. I'm so bad at these things."

His maniacal laughter stopped as abruptly as it'd started. Takuto awkwardly scratched his head and glanced over his shoulder at the subordinates waiting on standby behind him. Everyone felt compelled to bow their heads to him when he looked at them, and Atou, who'd escaped the twins' restraint during the interim, quietly walked up to him.

"King Takuto..." she said softly.

"Oh...Atou. Hmm, you know, I haven't done it yet."

"D-Done what, my king?"

Seeing his worried confidant come to his side plunged Takuto deep into thought. Atou couldn't understand what he was thinking and even began to worry that she had done something to upset him. Contrary to her fears, Takuto's train of thought had gone in yet another crazy direction.

"Sorry, I was just thinking that my feelings were really hurt when they took you from me, but I haven't gotten them back for that yet. It's not fair until they pay the price for that hurt, don't you think?"

"...Pardon?" Atou cocked her head. "You want payback?"

"Exactly." With that short reply, Takuto resumed his excogitation.

Atou was well-acquainted with Takuto's merciless tendency to thoroughly crush his enemies both on and off the battlefield. Even when it came to *Eternal Nations*, he was ruthless against players who deviated from just enjoying the game to doing things like trolling and griefing. He would always get the kind of extreme payback that made you wonder if he really needed to go that far to destroy them.

Erakino wasn't going to stay quiet after hearing his intentions. She wrangled the last of her fading lifeforce to put up what little fight she could to

stop him from getting his way.

“Who the hell do ya think will get down on all fours to suck up to you, you social reject! Why don’t you go bury your face in Atouy’s breasts and bask in your self-satisfaction, you loser—”

Erakino seemed to have forgotten she was up against Takuto Ira. A mere Witch had nothing on the evil residing within the King of Ruin. His revenge quest was far from over.

“A question for the system: are the vacant Game Master privileges still available?”

“...Huh?” Erakino gawked.

System Message

The session is still in progress.

A new Game Master hasn’t been selected yet.

The system answered him.

At this moment, Atou finally realized what her master was after. Rescuing Atou was definitely his objective. Their relationship assured her of that. However, her rescue was just one objective. Takuto wasn’t the type to end things there. Going by that understanding, everything up to this point had been an act—even his overly contemplative silence was just another performance.

Because...

“Okay, then, can I have the GM’s Authority?”

...he had carefully prepared everything for this moment.

No one could have predicted this development. As everyone tried to process what his request meant for them, Takuto raised his voice louder than usual so they could all hear him.

“I’ve been playing the game according to the rulebook... I know I’ve only had a few opportunities to roll the dice, but I’ve followed the rules regardless. I’ve been fair, won’t stand for cheating, and haven’t done anything to ruin the mood with slander or the like. I’m the model Player in every way,” Takuto elucidated, trying to persuade the system. Everyone who knew him well enough saw it more as him putting on airs for Erakino, or perhaps Keiji, who might still be watching from the higher dimension.

“What do you think? I submit the following suggestion to the system: grant Takuto Ira all Game Master privileges.”

System Message

The suggestion has been accepted, and the system hereby grants Game Master Authority to Takuto Ira.

We wish the best gaming experience to the new Game Master.

On this day, a nightmare Player viewed both as an *Eternal Nations'* Commander and *Elemental Ward's* Game Master was born.

“Erakino, was it? It’s your turn. I know a lot went down between us, but let’s get along as friends from now on,” Takuto said with a crafted grin. His smiling visage was as cold as ice and felt as empty as a void of darkness for its lack of emotion. **“I mean, as I said, I’m one hundred percent the give-what-you-get type.”**

“D-Don’t—”

GM: Message

Exercising Game Master Authority.

Reset Erakino’s ownership to default settings.

Reassign her under the new Game Master, Takuto Ira.

And then, right after giving his speech about how he was a fair and model player, Takuto wielded the Arbiter’s power without scruples...

■■■■■

It’s against the rules for a piece on the board to take away the Authority granted by the gods.

Outcome: Divine Punishment

The world stopped.

A strange space enveloped Takuto, sending alarm bells blaring from the depths of his very soul. He instantly understood that he’d just crossed a line that shouldn’t be crossed, and quickly tried to devise an out. But it was too late.

■■■■■

C/Seach? → gati0n → UNKNOWN → ERR0 →

Click00r9

Rejected.

The world jolted back into motion with an ear-piercing snap and an earth-

shattering tremble.

“Ghhh!” Takuto staggered and choked. His mind instantly deduced that something was fighting at a higher dimension that he couldn’t perceive. He clicked his tongue as he realized the danger he’d been in.

“An inquiry for the system: confirm the situation.”

The system responded by not sending any response to his mind as it usually did.

“...Did I go too far?”

I need to make extremely careful alterations to my plans, Takuto thought, deciding to switch gears. He’d planned on using and abusing the system to his heart’s content, but it seemed he’d flown too close to the sun—closer to the untouchable realm than Keiji Kuhara ever got.

His primary objective failed. At the very least, he achieved his bare minimum goal of recovering Atou, and even obtained a snippet of intel on the mysterious conflict taking place in this world. If he were to evaluate the results of his mission, he’d give it a C.

“That means I don’t need this thing anymore.”

My business is done here, he thought. Takuto pulled out a revolver-type pistol far too large for an ordinary person to hold and pointed the muzzle at Erakino.

“Erakino!” Soalina cried out for her friend despite her total exhaustion. After draining all her strength using countless Miracle Artes against the forces of evil until she was mentally depleted, it was all she could do just to stay standing upright with the support of her Holy Staff.

“Stay away, Soali!!” Erakino shouted. “Run away. You can’t beat him. You’ll be killed if you come any closer. Just run.” Sensing her defeat and imminent demise, Erakino offered her friend one last feeble smile.

This is the end for me, Erakino thought. *Without Master, there’s no going back. If we give this monster too much time to think, he’ll come up with yet another devious way to torture us. If I can at least help Soali escape before that...*

“...How curious. The session should’ve reset, and yet Saint Soalina is still Slurped. Is there some sorta hidden rule I don’t know about?”

Contrary to Erakino and Soalina’s terror, Takuto was intrigued by the situation like a scientist studying a guinea pig. The TRPG system should’ve removed all changes that benefited Lenea. If that was true, then Erakino’s Slurp—the brainwashing skill granted by her character sheet—should’ve lifted. And yet, their friendship remained, piquing Takuto’s suspicion.

“Atou...” Takuto’s suspicions didn’t apply to just Erakino and Soalina.

“You also hesitated to kill this filth. Why?”

Atou was also showing an unnatural amount of care for them. She normally would've slaughtered them in a fit of rage for what they'd done to her the moment she was freed from Slurp. But she didn't strike and instead waited obediently for Takuto's orders. Takuto knew the extent of Atou's loyalty and fanaticism, so he found the change baffling.

“What?!” she squeaked. “I'd never... I'm your loyal servant, my king! I-I'd never hesitate...!”

“Really? I'm not buying it.”

Takuto was right on the money. Atou was dismayed. She didn't know what to do with the feelings she had left for Erakino's side after being returned to her original faction. Since she had been reinstated as Mynoghra's Hero, she would undoubtedly shelve her feelings and cut Erakino down if ordered to. The real problem was that she had to ignore feelings she should've never had in the first place.

“...Because of feelings.”

The answer came from a surprising source—Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials.

“What feelings?” Takuto asked, sounding a tad disgusted.

Soalina had hobbled her way over to Erakino and was caring for her friend when she directed a sharp glare at Takuto and said what must be said.

“No matter how much power you wield, some things can never be overturned or trampled upon. You can't crush a person's feelings. Just like how Miss Atou, who swears loyalty to you, never stopped having feelings for you after joining our side, the love every living creature possesses is eternal and incorruptible.”

Takuto gagged, looking disappointed and repulsed by her response, but he listened until the end without interrupting her.

“Soalina...” Erakino said, moved.

“Erakino saved me. Her cheerfulness encouraged me,” Soalina continued emotionally, smiling softly at her friend. “It was only because I had her in my life that I remembered how to tread my own path and was able to think about how much I wanted to make this country better. Even if those feelings were the work of some external force, they can never be undone. That's why—”

Unfortunately for them, the man known as Takuto Ira was neither patient enough...

“Didn't you hear how much I hate unasked for monologuing?”

...nor did he care about others enough to give their emotional speech the time of day.

“GAAAAAH!”

“ERAKINO!!”

A bullet exploded from the revolver and accurately pierced Erakino’s heart. The Witch barely holding onto life, had what was left extinguished, bringing the end to one of Idoragya’s Seven Apocalypse-Bringing Evil Witches.

“Soali...na...run. Sur...vive...for me...” Erakino wrung out what little lifeforce she had to bid farewell to her beloved friend.

“Erakino! Erakino!” Soalina called her friend’s name between sobs as she shed messy tears for the life extinguishing in her arms. “Why?! Why did it come to this?! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

“You know, even if you bring up difficult concepts like love and feelings, it doesn’t make much sense to me. I’m pretty worn out, so I’ll try to consider it more later,” Takuto said dispassionately to the sobbing Saint.



Chapter 13: Soalina

SAINT Soalina of Blooming Burials started life as an ordinary girl living in one of Qualia's destitute northern villages. With the exception of one person, the status and abilities of a Saint were acquired later in life. No one knew what criteria the Holy God—whose existence had been verified—chose them by. The chosen were granted combat abilities that far surpassed a High Paladin's and unique Miracle Artes unlike any that came before them.

Soalina's ability was Blooming Burials. She'd received the overwhelming ability to control powerful flames, placing her at the top of the Saints when it came to destructive powers.

Soalina had a happy life. Her village and family were poor, but she managed to be content with her day-to-day, praying to God without fail and being an exemplary believer.

The Miracle Artes given by God came with a price. Recognition as a Saint came with a price. It wasn't clear whether the price came from the sheer strength of the Saint's power or if it was merely God's will that they pay one. In any event, every Saint since time immemorial has sacrificed something to obtain that power, and as a result, more than a few of these bastions of the people's faith and reverence have met tragic ends.

Soalina's price was every friendly person in her life. Her family, friends, acquaintances—just about everyone in her village.

They weren't involved in accidents or tragic incidents. That would have been a far kinder fate. No, it was none other than Soalina herself who set them ablaze with her flames.

At Central's orders.

...The people she loved went mad with the power of the Saint. Having obtained a certain kind of authority from their village producing a saint, they couldn't keep their desires in check and began making unreasonable demands to the other villages.

Saints hold immense sway and influence over the countries that worship the Holy God Arlos. Labor, food, wealth—all of it could be easily obtained just by mentioning their Saint's name. Even after Soalina cautioned them to stop their avarice, they only pretended to go along with her wishes briefly before returning to their ways.

Overwhelming good fortune and wealth had rained down on the once poor and frigid village. It eventually got to the point where the villagers let their rampant desires run unchecked. It's not like Soalina just sat back and watched it happen, nor did Central immediately forsake them. But the time Soalina bought them by going to Central and pleading directly with the Mystic Saint bore no fruit, since the villagers refused to be persuaded no matter what she tried.

Soalina was forced to face the facts when the surrounding villages started freezing and starving to death due to her village's actions. Her villagers weren't devout believers in God, but wicked souls led astray by avarice. Corrupted souls needed to be purged.

Her family, her friends, her neighbors...all that was left after she reduced them to ash were flowers in full bloom. Like a tribute to the departed, the flowers she offered to the dead merely existed where her loved ones once stood, never to speak to her again.

That's the story of the day Saint Soalina of Blooming Burials was born. The day a lonely girl sealed her heart away in her sorrow.

She had come so close to being rewarded for that sadness and misery...



"...WITHOUT much ado~!"

A cheery, flippant voice addressed Soalina. When she heard that voice and saw that figure, Soalina cursed God for filling the world with such despair.

"It's time for the ever-so-fun-and-lovely revenge time! *Soali*~♪!"

"...Erakino," Soalina choked out. Standing before her was Witch Erakino, the friend she'd been cradling in her arms only moments before.

No...it wasn't Erakino, but Takuto Ira imitating her.

"Bingo! It's little ol' me, your good pal Erakino~♪! Your one and only friend! Your sister from another mister, ehe! ...Oh, and let's not forget, I'm yet another friend *you* killed, Soali."

"No...no..."

Soalina buried her face in her hands and wept. Her past sins came back to haunt her, echoing a chorus of "Why did you kill us?"

"It was sooooo painful. I suffered soooooooooo badly... Say, say, Soali? Why did you hafta go and make such a rash suggestion? Eraki here was soooooooooo against going after the King of Ruin, but you just wouldn't take no for an answer, would you?"

Soalina knew. Oh, she knew. Knew who was the most at fault. Knew the

source, the catalyst, that led to this tragic outcome. She knew and continued to turn a blind eye to it.

“You got greedy, Soali~♪! Blinded by greed, blinded by the thought you were invincible with the GM’s powers, you went and did something stupid. So, so stupid.”

“No, I didn’t mean to...I didn’t. Please...please...forgive me, Erakino...”

Soalina had become full of herself. She’d finally opened her heart up to someone for the first time in a long time and could just be herself. Erakino was a beacon of light in her life—she treated her like another one of the girls, instead of as an untouchable Saint. And that’s why, Soalina got the wrong idea—she started to think she was special.

Soalina had falsely believed that if everything kept going well, she could get back everything she’d lost and live a happy, content day-to-day like she did as a child. Erakino would be right by her side, laughing with her, chatting about unimportant things, fighting occasionally, making up...

Yes, Soalina got the wrong idea by believing she could live out those fanciful days.

“Like hell I’d forgive you,” Erakino hissed. “Everybody’s gonna die because of you. All the Paladins, Fenny, our nation’s citizens...every single one of ’em’s gonna die. Just like little ol’ me here.”

“Aaaah...aaaaaaaaah!!” Soalina sobbed.

“You’re just as bad as the village that raised you. You arrogantly believe you have power and greedily consume everything around you until you lose it all...”

Erakino was so right it hurt.

It turns out I’m the same as those villagers when it comes down to it, Soalina realized. I’m greedy, have no self-control, and don’t care about the suffering of others. I’m being punished because of that. My punishment resulted in the loss of yet another loved one. I let this happen...when I know better than anyone else that Saints have to pay a price for their powers.

“It’s all your fault, Soali~♪!”

Soalina no longer had enough fight in her to talk back. She wanted to let everything come to an end. Perhaps she could meet Erakino again if she did. She didn’t believe in heaven, but just the possibility of seeing her friend again—the possibility of being with the people who were sacrificed because of her—made her want to meet her end.

I’ll apologize when I see everyone again, she thought. *I don’t know if*

they'll ever forgive me...but I'll apologize for all eternity if I have to. Forever... and ever...

Erakino's claws flashed in the corner of Soalina's eyes. An undefended hit by those would bring death even to the most enhanced Saint's body.

I'm okay with that.

She was okay with that.

Something exploded as the claws stronger than any steel arced through the air to cleave her in half.

"...Ngh!"

Soalina hadn't died. She was dumbfounded for a moment as she tried to comprehend why she was still clinging to life. She blinked to see something had forced its way between her and Fake Erakino.

"Run away, Soalina! You still have things to do!"

"Saint...Fenne..."

Veiled Saint Fenne Kahmair stood between her and death. Her veil was tattered from the battle, and darkish-red blood oozed from her abdomen. Even so, she mustered what little life she had left to save Soalina.

"I'll hold them back," Fenne said. "Erakino— Your friend told you to live, didn't she?! Then fulfill your duty to her! Don't just stand there waiting to die, SOALINA!!"

The face behind the veil was that of a wrinkled old woman. Soalina was shocked by how her youthful, enchanting voice belied her facial features, but understanding dawned when she remembered all Saints pay different prices for their abilities.

Fenne had her reasons for teaming up with Erakino and for being on the receiving end of Takuto's taunting words: *"You foolish, foolish woman who teamed up with a Witch for the sake of your own happiness."* She must've been clinging to some hope, no matter how impossible it was. Just as Soalina had things that were important to her, Fenne did too.

Is it really all right for us to give up on our dreams? For me to run away on my own? Soalina wondered. *And anyways...*

"Get out of here, Soalina! Hurry!" Fenne shouted.

...Where in Arlos's world am I supposed to run?

"Yeaaaah, I'm not gonna let you escape. Things will get messy later if I don't finish you off," Takuto, who'd reverted to his true form during their brief exchange, told them in an exasperated voice.

Even if she chose to run, there was no getting through the forces of evil surrounding them. Neither Saint wanted to admit it, but they were doomed.

"Resign yourselves to your fate and look forward to a better life next

time. You might actually have a chance at one,” Takuto said, beginning to imitate something else. His outline blurred, and something attempted to form from within the distortion. **“...?! GHHH!!”**

Takuto suddenly clasped his head in his hands and staggered backward.

“King Takuto?! What’s wrong?!”

Atou stopped watching from the sidelines and raced over to Takuto, shooting Soalina and Fenne an enraged look. But neither of them expected this outcome. They didn’t know what had happened either.

“Damn it... Caria, Maria!” Takuto called for the Elfuur Sisters, his voice pained, his hand pressed against his head.

“Here, here!”

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

The twins responded like usual, though they were worried about him.

“Is it done?” he asked, keeping it short.

“Indubitably, yes.”

“Perfecto!”

Takuto nodded and shifted his gaze toward Elder Moltar. **“Everyone here and accounted for?”**

“Yes, my liege... However, what ails you? Did those rotten Saints do something—”

“No...not them. They aren’t the threat, but we’ll withdraw. Gather around me now.”

Takuto wasn’t taking questions. Elder Moltar quickly realized something unexpected had happened within Takuto and that they had a duty to follow his orders swiftly.

“At once!”

“All units, gather around His Majesty!” Gia ordered in a loud voice after receiving the signal from Elder Moltar.

Mynoghra’s army converged around Takuto.

“That’s everyone. This range should be fine... Okay, let’s go.”

As soon as he finished speaking, Takuto transformed into Ice Rock. Several Dark Elves instinctively braced themselves, but hastily resumed their positions within the designated space.

“More important matters came up. I’ll excuse meself here for today,” he said to Soalina and Fenne. A tinge of impatience infused his voice while he still maintained the cool of the absolute victor.

“I hope we can have a friendlier conversation next time around,” Takuto said, temporarily reverting to his true form just to convey those words before shifting back into Ice Rock. Then he chanted the teleportation spell

anyone who ever played *Brave Questers* would know and retreated with his army to a jaunty tune.



LEFT in the wake of the forces of evil was a bereaved Soalina, an unconscious Fenne, and the shattered remnants of a dream called the Divine Nation of Lenea.

“Aah...aah...aah...” Soalina wept.

It was all over. Her dreams, her friends’ dreams, all of it. When she closed her eyes, she felt like she could hear Erakino’s overly friendly, loud voice that she never could come to hate. She had a feeling that if she looked over her shoulder, Erakino would pop out from behind a pillar like she was just playing a bad joke on them.

But Erakino was gone from this world...

“UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!!!”

Soalina broke down crying, for that was all she could do now.

Chapter 14: Promise

THE same day a victor was decided in the war between the forces of good and evil, Takuto and his people could finally relax back at Mynoghra's capital in the Accursed Lands.

"Oh, King Takuto!!"

A touching reunion played out upon their return to the Palace, but the emotion wasn't that of an over-the-top romantic comedy but a tragedy. Atou clung to her master, her face pale with worry.

"Please rest! You're going to hurt yourself!"

Takuto's fatigue showed on his face and demanded immediate rest. The reason for his exhaustion was simple: he used up too much energy during the war with the Divine Nation of Lenea.

The Hero known as the Nameless Evil God had the power to imitate everything, including natural phenomena. No world run by game mechanics would ever let a power capable of temporarily altering the way of the universe to be used without a cost. Takuto choosing to retreat when he did proved the burden was so great, he couldn't even spare the energy to finish off the enemy.

After returning to the Palace, he obediently crawled into bed and stayed there like Atou requested.

"How are you feeling?" Atou asked. "Shall I get you something to eat?"

Takuto couldn't stop smiling at Atou, sitting on the edge of his bed, fussing over him in every way like she was going to nurse him back to health all by herself. It finally felt like he got her back, and the threads of tension keeping him powering through it all loosened up for the first time since he lost her.

He hated to admit it, but he only very narrowly made this operation a success. The silver lining in this series of events was learning that he possessed the Nameless Evil God's ability to imitate anyone's appearance and abilities after seeing them once. But using that ability came with a somewhat costly price in the form of the headaches plaguing him at random intervals during the various battles and the overwhelming feeling of his energy being sapped right out of him. He felt the fatigue settle into his bones and spirit.

A few moves were all it'd take to change the outcome... If the enemy had made just a few more moves, Takuto's Perfect Imitation would've reached its limit, and the tides of battle would have changed in Lenea's favor. But it could

be said that Takuto Ira became the legend that he was because he was always able to overcome the odds and secure the impossible win in the end.

“Nah, I’m good on food. More importantly, I’m sorry it took me so long to save you.”

Takuto spoke sweetly to Atou, his kindness and compassion making his wrath seem like a distant memory. More than anything, his voice brimmed with a special emotion meant only for her.

Atou also felt delighted to be with Takuto again since she viewed the turbulent days under Lenea’s control as someone else’s memories.

“Please don’t apologize, my king. If anything, you should be blaming me for reacting too slowly during their initial attack.”

“No, no, I’m responsible. I neglected to put measures in place even though I considered the possibility of other games and Players being out there.”

“Nonsense. It’s my job to protect you, my king. I’m the one who should’ve deflected their attack!”

They continued to go back and forth, taking the blame and apologizing until they burst out laughing together and decided to agree that they both had things to improve.

A tranquil time passed between them. Although Atou realized Takuto wasn’t in the best condition yet, she hoped this moment would continue forever.

“Hey, Atou? Can I ask you for a favor now that we’ve made up?” Takuto suddenly asked as if the thought had just occurred to him.

“A favor? I’ll do anything you ask of me!”

It was an unusual word choice for Takuto. He could order her to do his bidding instead of requesting a favor. The way he gazed into her eyes made Atou blush and feel like he was about to say something especially important.

“Ah...um...I mean, if it’s within my ability...” she stammered.

Could this finally be our big romantic moment?! Atou began fantasizing about all sorts of things, clearly not entirely free of the feelings she’d entertained while aligned with the TRPG forces.

But Takuto’s request was of a different category from her fantasies.

“Okay, then I want you to get along with the others,” Takuto requested.

“Hwha...? Get along?” Atou parroted, struggling to comprehend his request.

Her confusion made perfect sense because “the others” referred to Mynoghra’s citizens and Takuto’s subordinates. Atou believed she was doing everything in her power to play nice with them and even thought they trusted and relied on her in turn.

What in the Accursed Lands made him ask that of me? she wondered. *And*

going to the extra length of phrasing it like a favor too...

“Um...is there something wrong with the way I’ve been behaving with the others?” she asked, worry seeping into her voice. “Do they hate me, and I just don’t know it?”

Am I the only one who thought we were on friendly terms? Or is he worried that discord will occur between us because of my time in Lenea?

Takuto chuckled at Atou as she cocked her head to one side, trying to find the answers to the dozen or so questions racing through her head.

“Nope, not at all. It’s not something you have to worry about right now, anyway. Just remember that I want you to get along and play nice with others in Mynoghra,” he stressed.

“I-If you say so...?”

“It’s a promise between us, Atou.”

Atou decided to let herself be convinced by his vague answer. She didn’t want to stress him out too much by pressing the subject. She was curious about the real intent behind his request, but figured she’d have plenty of time to ask him once he felt better.

As she made up her mind, Takuto held out his pinky finger.

“Let’s pinky promise then,” he said.

“Oh! Okay! ...Huh...”

“What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing. I just realized this is my first time ever making a pinky promise.”

“What a coincidence—me too.”

They both felt a little depressed by that realization, but equally excited over getting to experience it for the first time together. After an anticipatory pause, Takuto and Atou’s pinky fingers hooked around each other.

“Pinky swear, if you lie—” Takuto began, reciting the rhyme, then cut it short. “Hmm, making you swallow a thousand needles doesn’t sit well with me. Let’s go with this instead: I’ll be a little disappointed in you, Atou.”

“Noooo!” Atou whined. “I’d much rather swallow a thousand needles than have you be disappointed in me, King Takuto! I promise I’ll keep my word!”

“Haha!” Takuto laughed. “Then it did the trick. This is where we release our pinkies.”

With that, Takuto unhooked his pinky from hers and drew back his hand. Indescribable loneliness washed over Atou as she felt that slight warmth vanish from her grasp.

“Now I can rest easy...” Takuto whispered, the exhaustion finally catching up with him and sucking the last bit of energy out of him.

It was time to stop talking. Continuing to chat without letting him rest was bound to have a negative impact on his health. Atou decided to withdraw for the day and wait until he recovered so they could restart their busy but happy empire-management days together.

“I’ll leave you for now, King Takuto. Please rest well. I’ll explain what’s going on to the others,” she said with a smile. But then she saw it—the light of wisdom that always twinkled in Takuto’s eyes vanished. “King Takuto?”

“Sorry...who...are you?”

Her master stared back at her from the bed, looking as confused as a lost child.



WHAT happened after that was more shocking and tragic for Mynoghra than anything short of the death of their king. Ever since that day with Atou, Mynoghra’s king and Commander, Takuto Ira, suffered from full-blown amnesia. He couldn’t remember who he was, where he was, or who he was speaking to. He seemed to remember how to speak and the names of some basic items, but had no recollection of people or specific events. If that wasn’t hard enough on Mynoghra, Takuto spent most of his days in a deep sleep.

<Mynoghra’s Palace, Takuto’s Private Chambers>

IN the dark bedroom, Atou watched over Takuto’s sleeping face with a haggard expression.

“...Come in,” Atou said in response to the formal knock on the door.

Elder Moltar entered the room with her permission. He didn’t look as worn down as Atou, but the immense stress he felt from the situation was evident in his features.

“How does our king fair?” he asked in a solemn voice.

“The same as always,” Atou replied in a taut tone. “He’s stayed bedridden the whole time, and even when he awakes, he barely knows who I am.”

Elder Moltar was comparatively calmer than Atou because he’d already witnessed Takuto come back from the dead firsthand once before. He believed no matter how hopeless the situation looked, it was only because he viewed it through the limited knowledge of the Dark Elves. He was convinced his king would return in full form again, as he did on that fateful day not long ago. And that was why Elder Moltar could dedicate his time and focus on finding the cause of Takuto’s memory loss and stabilizing the nation.

“What in the Accursed Lands happened to His Majesty?” Elder Moltar asked. “I’ve had everyone under me look into it to no avail.”

“I don’t think you will find an external cause. I believe it’s because he overused his powers. This is all my fault,” Atou lamented.

“Lady Atou...”

Elder Moltar had considered that possibility too. King Takuto’s ability was all-powerful. Everything ended with his enemies being at the mercy of that power without ever understanding it. But wielding so much power couldn’t have come without a price. All signs pointed to him suffering the effects of overusing his ability.

Elder Moltar was having his subordinates investigate dark magic and doing whatever was necessary to procure useful texts on the subject to help Takuto regain his strength. He naturally had no intention of ever blaming Atou for what had happened. King Takuto had acted per his mighty will. His subordinates’ role was to support his decisions, not question them.

“I am powerless. Incompetent when it counts,” Atou sighed. “All I do is lose my presence of mind when I’m needed most... I’m worthless compared to King Takuto, who dashinglly rescued me when all seemed hopeless.”

Elder Moltar did come to check on Takuto, but his main purpose was to seek Atou’s assistance. She had been given the authority to lead Mynoghra during one of the short bouts when Takuto regained his memories. In other words, she had become the interim Commander capable of commanding the construction of new facilities and production of various units.

They needed a Commander now more than ever, and it was her duty to increase their national power to prepare for the possibility that Takuto might not recover for a long time. In addition to Domestic Affairs, they needed to launch an immediate investigation into what had happened to the Divine Nation of Lenea and the Saints after they retreated. Mynoghra was honestly at a point where it could suffer massively without a Commander taking control.

But one look at Atou told Elder Moltar she wasn’t fit for the job right now. She was mentally and physically depleted, with no motivation to lead an empire.

“I don’t have it in me...” Atou said. All Elder Moltar heard from her these days was a litany of self-abasement. But what she uttered next upended his expectations. “...So I will ask him to do it.”

“Him...who?” Elder Moltar asked.

The grim despair vanished from Atou’s crimson eyes, replaced by a heroic determination. She gently stroked a still-asleep Takuto’s cheek, then stood and faced Elder Moltar.

“Hero Vittorio,” she replied, mentioning a name Elder Moltar and the rest

of the Dark Elves had never heard. “Gleeful Spin Doctor Vittorio is his full title. He specializes in trickery and scheming, and is the most effective under these circumstances and...”

Atou brought up the name of a new Hero unit. They had never informed the Dark Elves about him, but everyone who originated from Mynoghra knew his name...there was no way not to.

“...You could say he’s the lowest, most despicable Hero in the history of Mynoghra.”

In *Eternal Nations*, he was the Hero most known for his notorious troublemaking.



Side Story: Doll

BACK when not even a shadow of danger loomed over Mynoghra, their Commander, King Takuto Ira, encouraged the people to enjoy their pastimes. This policy stemmed from the modern values instilled in Takuto during his previous life and his staunch opposition against a sweatshop-like work environment. It also had more than a little to do with his strong convictions against a life devoted entirely to work. Although it might be a bit questionable that such strong convictions were held by someone who spent the majority of his short life in the hospital...

At any rate, no soul belonging to Mynoghra would oppose the king's decree, especially when said decree was made with their wellbeing in mind.

This was how the Dark Elves inhabiting Mynoghra began building a culture steeped in enjoying hobbies and pastimes. Such activities weren't limited to the Dark Elf denizens alone.

"Mmmmm..." Atou groaned.

In the private chambers Atou had secured for herself right next to the king's own chambers—something that should've been unthinkable in most palaces—Atou scrunched up her face as she stared hard at one spot on her desk.

"How...do I even begin to describe this?"

Today was her day off. It was questionable whether one of Mynoghra's council members and a Hero of darkness actually needed days off, but she wasn't going to complain when it was none other than her king and master who told her to rest. She honestly would've preferred to spend every second of every day clinging to Takuto, but she couldn't go doing her own thing right after publicly agreeing with Takuto's policy to have people enjoy things other than work.

This resulted in her holing herself up in her room and spending time away from Takuto—a rare occurrence indeed.

"I've created something absurd..." she whispered in a gloomy voice.

The reason for her gloom was on the receiving end of her intense gaze. How should she even begin to describe what she had created? If ignoring the heartfelt effort she'd put into it, calling it a disfigured lump of cloth would best describe the object.

"I can't believe I so epically failed at my King Takuto doll..."

Sadly, the shabby object in question was supposed to be a doll Atou had put her heart and soul into making look like Takuto. This thing she brought into the world with her own two hands was noticeably dark red and boasted an eerie appearance. Takuto's attire had very little red, yet that was the predominant color her creation took on. And the problems didn't stop there...

The worst part of all was that she didn't neglect to make a rough version of all his body parts. Human body parts of various sizes peaked out from the dark red lump, thrusting wildly into the air as if cursing their living counterpart.

No amount of excuses or exaggerations could allow anyone to claim this monstrosity was a doll. Small children would surely cry at the sight of it.

This object that any horror enthusiast would gladly buy was Atou's first attempt at a Takuto doll.

"I o-obviously can't show this to King Takuto. But...what in the world must I do to improve? I mean, this is bad...real bad."

Atou knew how horrifying her creation was. She stared at it like she might a Long-legged Bug taking a shower. She couldn't see a path to improve from a creation you'd want to hide under your bed to something she'd be okay showing off, even if flawed.

It's worth noting that she was, indeed, following a proper guidebook. The monstrosity staring back at her resulted from following the steps in the book she had Takuto use Emergency Production to procure for her.

The road ahead is long, and there'll be many setbacks, but retreat is out of the question. Atou had to persist because it was none other than Takuto who'd strongly recommended that she pick up a hobby...

I've tried my hand at more hobbies than I care to count. I started with cooking, which ended up dashing my hopes and dreams when my first several dishes turned out as charcoal lumps. I've since been certified as someone without any fashion sense. I'm forbidden from partaking in sports or martial arts of any kind because I'll destroy my opponents...literally. I'm no good at games... This is the only hobby left for me!

Obviously, the world has a lot more hobbies to offer than what Atou had tried. But a hobby isn't something you force yourself to do, and Atou wanted to enjoy what she picked. Dollmaking offered a win-win scenario since she could enjoy making Takuto dolls while also showing off to the man himself what a cutesy hobby she'd selected. She didn't want to give up—even in the face of these tragic results—when this hobby served her self-interests and a practical use.

"As they say...practice makes perfect. I'll practice until I can make my ideal couple dolls of King Takuto and me!" Atou declared, setting her sights

high to motivate herself.

As Mynoghra's Hero and Takuto's confidant, Atou didn't need to put in this much effort. All she needed to do was use it as an enjoyable way to kill some time. But her horror over how terrible she was at handicrafts and her desire to improve lit a fire under her. Atou found herself respecting her king all the more, for the resolve ignited by her rebellious spirit and the strange excitement filling her chest made her realize how wonderful it was to have a hobby.

"First things first, I must dispose of this atrocity. I wouldn't want anyone to see it."

She especially didn't want Takuto to see it. There was no way she could possibly make up for the rudeness of creating a doll in Takuto's likeness that turned out like...*this*. She would die of embarrassment if he found out. Fortunately, as long as Atou didn't tell anyone, no one, no matter how smart they were, would ever guess the cloth monster was meant to be a Takuto doll...

Atou held the doll to her and headed for the garbage can.

"Whoa— Atou...?"

She made eye contact with the doll's model.

"K-K-K-K-K-K-King T-Takuto! Wh-What brings you here?!"

"Uh, well... Sorry?"

"Don't be! You are welcome in my room anytime, my king!"

Atou's master had shown up in her room unannounced. And his gaze was locked on the Takuto Doll she had clasped to her chest with both hands.

Things couldn't get any worse.

Atou could only freeze up in response to Takuto's sudden appearance in her room.

Meanwhile, Takuto wasn't expecting this turn of events either. Even he understood that it was wrong to enter a lady's room uninvited. He had knocked on the door and called out to her before entering. But when she didn't answer him after all of that, he worried that something had happened to her and acted without thinking.

If he had stopped to think about it a little more, he could have taken several other actions first, but Takuto tended to act rashly when it came to Atou. He shouldn't be blamed for what he did out of concern for her.

It should never be forgotten that he suffered from a lack of social skills. Nine out of ten times, he was bound to make the wrong decision when it came to social situations. As such, Takuto's inner turmoil was on par with Atou's. No... it was actually a whole tier worse.

Yeah, there's no mistaking it...that's a failed attempt! Takuto thought. *She tried to make something and failed at it horribly!*

Takuto was the one who'd encouraged all of Mynoghra to pick up hobbies. He'd even advised Atou to find a hobby, so it wasn't hard to guess what was going on.

Naturally, he planned to respect whatever hobby Atou chose for herself. He didn't care whether it produced perfect results or not. It's a hobby—as long as the person enjoyed themselves, the results didn't matter. He wasn't like some people who expected even someone's pastimes to produce something. So he didn't care one way or another if Atou had failed at something she was trying to make for her hobby.

Yes, the failed product wasn't the problem. The real problem here was...

It'll hurt Atou's feelings if I say the wrong thing! Wh-What's the right thing to say in this situation?!

"That's a lovely doll," Takuto settled for. "Is that supposed to be one of Mynoghra's Shoggoth units?"

"It's you, King Takuto..."

The room froze.

Both of them screamed internally that they had said the absolute worst thing. Takuto had made a shot in the dark guess, while Atou had told the truth because she didn't want to lie to her master.

The silence mercilessly stabbed them both.

At this rate, the status quo would be maintained until one of them broke down and started crying. However, there was one man who summoned up his courage to make sure that didn't happen. Yes...Mynoghra's King Takuto Ira tried to save the situation.

"W-Well, no one's perfect the first time. Don't worry about it."

"Aw, thank you..." Atou sniffled.

Takuto was somehow able to correct course. He'd epically failed with his first comment but received passing marks with his second. He hoped his next would get them past this awkward moment.

"Besides, there's a lot we can verify if you get good after practicing a bunch," he said.

"Really? Like what...?"

"Improving Culture Levels."

Takuto decided to reveal one of the strategies he hadn't discussed with anyone yet in hopes of distracting them from the uncomfortable mood. He wanted to verify the existence of a component called Culture.

Atou realized he wasn't just using a random phrase, but referring to one of the stats an empire can improve in *Eternal Nations*. Her expression clouded over slightly despite her realization.

“Culture, you say? Now that you mention it, *Eternal Nations* has a Cultural Victory, too, doesn’t it?”

“I’m not surprised you didn’t think of it right away. We never did much with Culture...”

Culture in *Eternal Nations* is the quantification of the influence various civilizations have on the world. It covers everything from an empire’s arts to its civics and religions. Essentially, everything that makes up an empire, from its language to its attire and even the food its citizens eat, can be collectively classified under Culture and becomes a part of that empire’s influence.

A Cultural Victory becomes possible when every aspect of an empire’s Culture becomes the object of envy, and other empires naturally start to seek alliances or offer up their allegiance.

A Cultural Victory was a longshot for Mynoghra, which not only had its evil-alignment stacked against it, but also had the culturally incompetent Homunculus as its starter race.

“I don’t think Mynoghra can exercise much influence with its Culture,” Atou pointed out.

“You can say that again. That’s why I want to try experimenting around.”

Takuto completely agreed with Atou. There was no world in which this man who knew every detail about Mynoghra and stood as its undefeated leader would overlook one of its key traits. He was after something different with this strategy.

“What kind of experiment?” Atou asked.

“So, we’ve already figured out that this world’s version of *Eternal Nations* doesn’t work exactly like the game we knew, right?”

Atou nodded. They had already verified that theory through everything they’d experienced in this world so far. The game system occasionally acted outside of their expectations. It almost seemed like someone was adjusting the settings to something easier to parse, causing a headache for Takuto and Atou when it came to those good and bad changes.

“I’m thinking the same probably applies to Culture too. In the game, your empire can keep existing even if your Culture Level is stuck at zero, but in reality, doesn’t it seem absurd for there to be a nation without any kind of culture whatsoever?”

“When you put it that way, it certainly does...”

Just when they thought the system was interpreting things in a way that was convenient for them, it would then overinterpret certain points. That was how the *Eternal Nations*’ system had worked so far in this world. Based on his experience, Takuto decided that it’d be better to promote Culture in some way to

double-check if his understanding of the system was correct. His decision stemmed from a heartfelt desire to do something for the Dark Elves, who he believed were working far too hard.

“I see, so that’s what was behind this most recent policy,” Atou said.

“Yep. That said, what matters most is that everyone enjoys some free time. It’s okay to take it in stride and just have fun.”

In fact, Takuto wanted to confirm one other point. He wanted to know: Can Mynoghra’s units—entities derived from a video game—grow and change? He wasn’t thinking about the type of growth that came with leveling up or Atou’s unique ability as a Hero unit to steal skills. His question was more: Can life experience as an individual overcome and overwrite their base character settings?

He was essentially trying to investigate what kind of entity Atou and the rest of the units could be classified as. Were they really nothing more than game characters, even though they had memories? Or were they already freed from such restraints and in possession of a soul and a sense of self that couldn’t be violated?

If his latter theory was correct, then it begged the question: who granted them this life and power? No, the real question was: who and with what purpose were they granted life in this world?

What in the world am I? Takuto had begun to question his existence a bit more lately. *Meh, no point thinking about something I won’t be getting the answers to any time soon!*

After all, I know Atou is the Atou who has been with me all along. That’s the one absolute in this world.

Takuto could say for certain that Atou was his other half—the girl he’d spent much of his past life with. Sure, he didn’t have hard evidence to prove it, but he held an unswerving conviction that it was so. As long as that fact existed, the human known as Takuto Ira felt he could go on forever. He knew that with her, he could overcome any difficulty and every obstacle in their way.

That was his—

“Setting aside the serious talk, King Takuto...”

Takuto snapped back to reality, feeling like he was being dragged back to the surface of his thoughts after plunging into their spiraling depths. Startled he’d become so absorbed in his thoughts that he’d neglected Atou, he shifted his gaze back to her and smiled to deflect from his momentary lapse. His gaze landed squarely on Takuto Doll #1. Or more precisely, a suspicious-looking object attempting to resemble him.

“D-Do you think I’ll ever get better...?” Atou asked, her voice trembling.

“They say that a journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step, so I know you can do it. I believe in you, Atou.”

Takuto felt his own growth, seeing as he was able to encourage her on the spot. He felt like he’d just made up for the countless mistakes he’d made earlier in the conversation. The experience points he’d gained amid the awkwardness were definitely accumulating within him.

I can do this. I’m definitely getting better at communicating. Takuto was feeling proud of himself, when...

“I don’t believe in myself one bit, though. Especially when I think of the hundreds of failures up to this point...”

“E-Er...”

He hesitated and immediately regretted it. Where did his confidence and conviction from a moment earlier go? His face twitched into a forced smile as he tried to comfort Atou as she looked up at him with teary eyes.

CONGRATULATIONS
ON MYNOGHRA
VOLUME 5!





Afterword

LONG time no see. Fehu Kazuno here.

Thank you for picking up a copy of *Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra Volume 5*. I'm honored the series has made it to five whole volumes!

Picking up where the last volume left off, I finally got to write about Takuto fighting in person this time. What did you think of our main character's first real battle? Well, his personality made it different from your typical fight, but I believe he did plenty to level the playing field in his own way.

On a completely different topic, I'm happily tweeting away on Twitter again today. I would love it if you followed me! It brings a smile to my face every time my follower count increases.

My Twitter handle is: @Fehu_apkgm

Speaking of Twitter, I also want to express my gratitude to everyone following me from overseas! *Mynoghra* is currently being published in English, French, and Korean. It's a bit embarrassing to know that my story is being read throughout the world, but I'm even more delighted about it than I am embarrassed. I hope all my overseas fans continue to enjoy the series.

In other news, just the other day—well, the other day, while I was still working on volume 5—*Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra* was nominated for the Next Light Novel Award 2021 (*Tsugi ni Kuru Raito Noberu Taishō 2021*) presented by Kadokawa Corporation's Kimirano light novel and literature recommendation website.

The final results are already out, and believe it or not, *Mynoghra* took 16th place overall! It remarkably ranked 9th in the Web Book Category. I'm thrilled to receive such an amazing ranking in an award that's decided by fan vote.

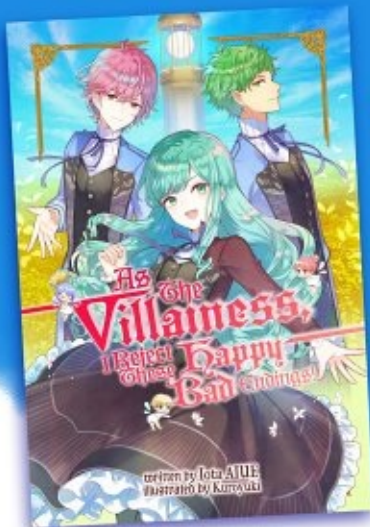
Really, thank you so much for your vote. There was a total of 133 series nominated, and all of them were of the highest quality. All my rivals in the competition felt like last bosses, so I was filled with trepidation about how it would turn out.

Once again, I want to express my gratitude to each and every one of you for encouraging and voting for me. I take the results that came from all your support and expectations very seriously, and I will continue to put it to good use, so please continue to support me!

I also want to mention that Yasaiko Midorihana-sensei's *Apocalypse Bringer Mynoghra* manga is still receiving online and physical releases. The manga has just reached the beginning of the novel's third volume and is about to get heated, so if you haven't checked it out yet, be sure to! Midorihana-sensei's stunning art and storyboarding pops off every page and pulls you right in!

All right, I'm almost out of pages to write, so allow me to move on to the usual acknowledgments. To Illustrator Jun, the editing department at GC Novels, my editor, the proofreaders, the design company, and everyone else, thank you for everything you do.

Most of all, to every single one of you who continues to support and encourage me, I thank you once again.



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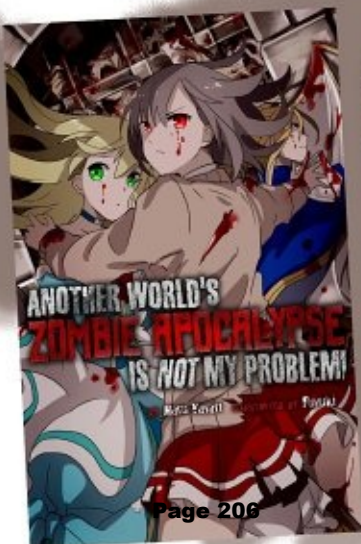
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